

Challenge of the Iron League

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Following the Kalos Crisis, Ash and his Kalosian friends are reunited in the nearby Ferrum region; an unexplored land where strong trainers gather for the prestigious Iron League Tournament. As an unfinished business rears its head in the region and new rivalries and challenges present themselves, a new adventure awaits the Kalos crew. [Post-XY story, Amourshipping]

Status: ongoing

Published: 2019-10-20

Updated: 2019-11-07

Words: 32036

Chapters: 4

Rated: Fiction T - Language: English - Genre: Adventure/Friendship - Characters: [Ash K./Satoshi, Serena] Alain/Alan, Sawyer/Shota - Reviews: 46 - Favs: 73 - Follows: 75

Original source: <https://www.fanfiction.net/s/13413642/1/Challenge-of-the-Iron-League>

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The Land of the Iron Battles

The crowd in the stadium was going wild as the match continued under their eyes. Inside the confined battle arena, the two trainers were showing off a level of skill that only true veterans could bring to the table.

"Blitz, Thunderbolt, bullet style!"

"Pika!" The lanky Pikachu leaped to the side, several waves of Thunderbolt radiating from his body and aiming towards the Machop he was facing. The Fighting-type Pokémon dodged on the opposite direction, then sprinted forward, four arms on the ready.

His trainer smirked, throwing his arm ahead. "Cross Chop!"

The Machop crossed both pairs of arms, bulldozing his way towards the now upright Pikachu. The Electric-type stared back at him, electricity sparking from his cheeks.

"Iron Tail, upwards style!" Pikachu's trainer shouted, her short brown hair fluttering in the wind as she punched onward.

As the Machop's arms struck down, Pikachu somersaulted and held his tail straight up, matching the Fighting-type's power and springing back skyward from the impact. Pikachu steadied himself in mid-air, and fired a searing Thunderbolt right for his opponent. The Machop deflected it with a quick jump back, ready for another Cross Chop, only for Pikachu to aim a barrage of Electro Balls on his way.

Machop quickly slammed his hands on the Electro Balls with a Karate Chop and tossed them away in several directions, the electric bullets impacting over the barrier around the battlefield. The Fighting-type flinched briefly, but didn't yield.

The Pikachu and Machop traded a challenging glare, all while their trainers did the same. The match was still far from over, and they all were having fun.

"What a fantastic match, people! Truly something worthy of the strongest trainers of our beloved Ferrum League!"

The Pikachu and Machop went at each other once more, their trainers continuing to order increasingly elaborate moves and counters in an effort to claim victory.

The battle raged on, the screen making sure to capture the most dynamic and exciting slices of the action, underscoring the level of skill of the trainers involved, with the little crowd of villagers cheering for their favorites to seize victory. It was certainly an infectious excitement, given the hooded girl couldn't keep her eyes away from the giant public display.

A sad smile lit up her face, adjusting her hood and holding her brooch. The way Pokémon and humans could fight as one to surpass their limits, becoming greater as one than they were alone, was truly a spectacle to behold. Their bonds and passion were unquestionable, and most of all admirable.

She glanced in the distance, towards the destroyed quarry behind her. The earth itself seemed to have been torn asunder as nature wilted away, like a war had been waged on it, several wild Pokémon laying unconscious on the ground, defeated and powerless. It had all happened in the span of five minutes, and it would happen many, many other times still, all over Ferrum.

The girl frowned, a hand over her long, blonde hair. That was all her fault, and she needed to do something about it.

And so, without any hesitation, the girl flittered away into the woods, leaving the quaint town and the battle behind her.

For Alyssa, there was nothing better than being in the middle of a battle. Winning or losing didn't matter; just being there with Blitz, doing their best together, was enough to send her into boundless excitement. And she knew that the same applied to Glenn and his Machamp, and most importantly to the crowd cheering them on all over the Ferrum League Stadium.

As Blitz and Machamp were locked in a flurry of fists and tails, the battle trainer tapped on the device plugged to her ear, activating her Battle AR. A small screen extended from it, quickly giving her an overview of the battle. Pikachu was still roughly at two thirds of his stamina and health, while Machamp was inching closer and closer to defeat, with roughly equal levels of Synergy energy between them and still one minute left for the time limit.

Was he trying to win by time out? Or maybe trying to use the power of Synergy to put her in a tight spot? There were several ways for Glenn to win, and she knew he would pursue them all. Alyssa smirked; he truly deserved his title as highest ranked League Master of Ferrum.

Unfortunately for him, she and Blitz would still find a way to prove victorious, like a true battle trainer.

"Go, Machamp! Hit Blitz!" Glenn yelled, sweeping his hand forward. Machamp thrust forward, readying four Dynamic Punches at once. Blitz was quick on the uptake, backflipping to safety and then leaping forward, a powerful Thunder Punch slamming right onto Machamp's jaw. The Machamp was thrown back, and a brief chime played on her Battle AR. Alyssa looked it over, and beamed as she saw the Synergy levels of Blitz were just about right.

Glenn and his Machamp seemed to know, too, because the Fighting-type was already dashing forward in an effort to block her partner. Alyssa chuckled out, and simply pressed over her Battle AR's button.

"Synergy Burst, on!" the woman yelled, energy sparking from herself and radiating forward. Blitz somersaulted in place, the same energy

enveloping his entire body, now sparking like lightning itself. The mere burst of energy was enough to send Machamp flying backwards and into the barrier of the battle arena. Glenn bared his teeth, powerless.

And before the League Master could counter the move in any way, Alyssa wiggled her finger in a taunt, as Blitz scurried closer to the rising Machamp.

"I'm sorry, Glenn, but this is the end of the road for you." And with that, Alyssa activated her Battle AR again, punching forward. "Blitz! Volt Shock Fist!"

Blitz headbutted Machamp right on the chest, causing him to flinch as the Pikachu was blown back, his whole tail shimmering with blue electricity. Before Machamp could recover Blitz nailed him in the stomach again, strong enough to send him flying upward. Blitz then slammed his electric tail into the Fighting-type, sending him even further up.

Blitz then leapt through the air, his own electricity amping up his speed as he zoomed through the air in a zig-zag pattern, a trail of lightning behind him as he outstretched his fist, all his electric power coalescing in a powerful, giant electric punch.

And with all his speed and power, Blitz's superpowered punch slammed right into the airborne Machamp, the Fighting-type screaming in pain on impact.

The Electric-type landed with grace and a cocky smirk on the ground, just as his opponent fell behind him, bruised and weakened. And after a brief attempt at getting back up, the Machamp finally fell.

"Machamp is unable to battle! The winner of the match is our Grand Master, Alyssa!"

The crowd exploded in a flurry of clapping, all while Blitz crossed his arms and shrugged in his best attempt to look threatening and

intimidating. Alyssa smiled and basked into the crowd's cheer, enjoying the sweet moment of victory as she gave her Pokémon a proud grin.

The Grand Master's attention shifted back to Glenn, her subordinate in the rankings recalling his Machop with a frown. It was short-lived, however, as the man smiled and placed his Poké Ball aside, saluting the crowd and all those that cheered from him. Her smile got just a bit wider; she knew Glenn enough, and how even the harshest defeat was nothing but a stepping stone on the road to be the best. He truly embodied everything that made a battle trainer great.

Grand Master and League Master met halfway on the field as the battle arena dissipated, the trainers sharing a handshake worth a thousand words as they smiled at each other. It was a compliment for the good fight, and a promise to prove victorious the next time, just as it always should've been.

As the crowd continued with their frenzy of excitement, Alyssa and Blitz took in all their enthusiasm as they headed back towards the backstage, never losing their happy grin until they finally were away from any prying eyes. At that point, the League Master and her friend allowed fatigue to catch up with them, the Grand Master recalling her Pokémon out of gratitude and to let him rest.

She was completely exhausted, but it was hard not to feel at least some pride after her victory. All she needed was to rest up a bit, and then she would be able to tackle her daily tasks, just as usual.

"Congrats. That was a great battle."

Alyssa paused, turning to the side. Just behind her was a familiar bespectacled woman with long brown hair, waving at her with a smile. At her side was a Weavile, licking up an ice cream with the most pleased expression over his face.

"Weav!" the Pokémon said, winking as he kept eating.

The short-haired woman smirked, giving a shrug. She had to expect that Nia and her Weavile would come to see her, considering how advertised the battle had been. Still, she couldn't say she was too annoyed at their presence.

"I'm the Grand Master of the Iron League and Champion of the Ferrum region, I'm not allowed to slack off." She turned her eyes back to the stadium, where a reporter was now interviewing Glenn for some post-battle commentary. She grumbled to herself. "Especially not for a highly televised event. The FSBC reporters would be all over me otherwise."

Nia folded her arms, smirking back at her. "Oh, cut it out. We all know you'd do your best regardless of camera presence."

"Perhaps." Alyssa chuckled out. Her eyes quickly went to Blitz's Poké Ball, a light frown over her face. "But still, I need to be sharp. This year's Iron League tournament is coming soon, and it's the time to show the world what Ferrum and its battle trainers have to offer."

"Are the preparations going well for it?"

"For the most part, yes. Neos' city hall already gave us the clearance to hold the opening event in the Battle Square. I've had to spend more time looking into those mysterious incidents all around Ferrum than the tournament preparations."

Nia frowned as well, and Alyssa sighed, reminded of the most annoying of her current duties. Throughout the last few weeks, there had been more than a few strange happenings all around their region, with Pokémon found defeated, countryside left in disarray and strange energy readings all over the place. People were still debating what exactly was causing it, but word that the Ferrum League was helping the authorities in looking for the cause of the incidents had done a lot to keep the region at peace. Unfortunately, it also meant that she and her colleagues got very little time to themselves. At times she wondered if Champions of other regions were as overloaded of work as she was.

"The last one was near Tellur Town, right?" Nia asked, stepping closer to the Grand Master.

"I already sent Keith to look into it." Alyssa rubbed her forehead, but she quickly exhaled and took to grin back to her friend. "It's a weird situation, but it's nothing we can't deal with. Like strong and unbending steel, there's nothing battle trainers can't face."

Nia laughed out at that. "You're definitely working on your PR skills."

"Hey, we can't look bad in front of guests and prospective challengers." Alyssa rolled her eyes, arms on her hips. "I've already sent several invitations to many strong trainers, after all."

"Anyone worth noting?" Nia leaned forward, adjusting her glasses.

"Some of our neighbors from Kalos. There have been some interesting trainers around there recently." Alyssa smiled again, pride swelling in her chest as she thought back of all the letters she sent. "I'm curious about who will actually answer the call now."

"I'm sure there will be some interesting fellows." Nia pushed up her glasses. "And regardless of who will take part, I have a hunch this will be a League to remember."

Her Weavile nodded along, his ice cream now completely gone as he playfully licked his claws. Alyssa was almost curious to ask if they were actually going to take part in the tournament this time, but choose against it and simply grinned again.

"Oh, I sure hope it is." Alyssa then grabbed her phone, quickly typing up a message for Keith asking for updates before waving at her friend. "Have a good day, Nia."

"Good luck for everything, Alyssa."

Without a further word, the Grand Master walked away from the other battle trainer, her attention still on the phone as she headed to

the exit, sending a few more messages to keep all the important matters in check before arranging for a meeting with all the other League Masters to welcome their guests of honor.

There was still some time before the Iron League would begin, but that only motivated Alyssa to work all the harder on its preparations. She would've made it one of the best Iron League tournaments the Ferrum region had ever seen, and no natural or man-made disaster would be able to stop them.

Esteemed Mr. Alain,

Due to your outstanding results in the Lumiose Conference, it is our pleasure to invite you to take part in the Iron League tournament, to be held in the Ferrum region, the land where the strongest trainers gather.

If you would be interested in taking part, you're cordially invited in Neos City for the introductory event of the tournament.

We'll eagerly await your answer, and we hope a trainer of your skill will find a thrilling challenge that no other place could offer you in our region.

Until then, we send you our regards.

Grand Master Alyssa and the League Masters of the Iron League

Alain, assistant of Professor Sycamore and nominal winner of the latest Lumiose Conference, couldn't stop reading that letter over and over. It had arrived out of the blue in the mail, and he still had no idea what to say about it. He had always flown under the radar as a trainer, content being just a simple lab assistant or doing odd jobs here and there, and never really took part into any major tournament until the Kalos League, and even then mostly for selfish reasons. Being considered for some kind of event wasn't something he would've ever expected.

Around him, however, there were a few people and Pokémon that seemed far more excited and interested about the invitation than he was.

Mairin gave one of her usual big smiles, looking at the letter over and over. "Wow, you got popular! This sounds like a big deal!"

"Chespin ches!" Chespie agreed and held his tiny fist up while he munched on some macarons.

Alain didn't react, his gaze still fixated on the mail, and more specifically the place it came from: Ferrum, more specifically Neos City. He couldn't remember clearly but the name felt familiar to him, probably something that Lysandre had mentioned once in a while during their search of that giant rock. And if that was the case, then it was probably something he should've remembered.

"The Ferrum region, huh." Professor Sycamore edged closer, stroking his chin in interest. At his side, he could see that Garchomp was doing the same, scratching at her fin with her claw.

Alain blinked. "Did you hear about it before, professor?"

Sycamore nodded, and picked up a small book of geography from a nearby library. The man opened it to Kalos' page, pointing just a bit under it.

"It's a pretty small region just a bit over the border from Kalos. It's not a place most trainers tend to visit or hear about, since it lacks a typical Pokémon League or Gym Leaders." The researcher smiled, moving to another page that talked of the Ferrum region in particular. "That said, it's still quite rich in history, and the Iron League is a well-respected non-traditional tournament, on par with the Orange League and Kanto's Battle Frontier."

Alain looked over the page with little interest, mostly talking of its own format of battling with decades of traditions and some interesting ruins and sanctuaries dotting the region, and of the

current configuration of the Ferrum League. He was more interested in the professor's words, and what it actually meant.

"So, it's a way to push a trainer's skills further." Alain clenched his fists, feeling an old rush of excitement flowing in his veins.

"You should take part in it! It's about time to test out your new Keystone and Mega Stone!"

Alain glanced over Mairin's proud expression for all of a second, before his attention moved back to the slightly-misshapen white bracelet housing a Keystone on his right wrist. It had been a small gift from his younger friend after a long day of exploring Terminus Cave, which led to several angry Golbat, Chespie losing quite a few pounds, and the almost accidental discovery of a Keystone and Charizardite X during their Sundial investigations.

He also glanced back at his loyal partner Charizard, sitting on the side as he ate some of Sophie's Pokémon food. He was once again outfitted with his bulky piece of neck armor, a Mega Stone proudly embedded in its center once more. As he hoped to, he had managed to claim those powers for himself, without the influence of Lysandre and Team Flare hanging over him, but the simple fact that he was now holding the same power that caused him his fair share of grief and problems was still something that gave him pause. It was probably why he still didn't muster the courage to use Mega Evolution again.

The teen remained silent, unsure of what to say. And then, he exhaled and passed a hand over his hair, slouching on his chair.

"I don't know, I have a lot to do here. I'm not sure I have time for something like this."

He wasn't sure if it was more that he couldn't or that he wasn't sure how good of an idea it was. He had already pursued the path to be stronger than anyone around him, and while he couldn't deny its appeal, he also remembered where that path led him: to feeling lost,

to make his loved ones feel bad about him, and to the barely averted annihilation of the Kalos region and the world at large.

He couldn't be that kind of person anymore, and he couldn't risk to stray from his new path to commit the same mistakes. Too many people had to pay for that already.

Mairin didn't let up, however, as she slammed her hands on the table and puffed her cheeks at him. "Hey, come on! You love fighting, and I'm sure Charizard would love to take part! Think about your Pokémon!"

Alain did so, his eyes meeting his Charizard's. He could see it, the fire of determination and the drive to face new opponents, but not to just be the strongest there was. He didn't *need* it, but he definitely *wanted* to fight.

But even with that, Alain could feel a knot in his stomach at the whole possibility. And so, he turned to the only person he could ask for help at that point. For his part, Professor Sycamore just gave a shrug and inched closer, smiling out at him.

"Personally, I think that's a marvelous idea." He petted Garchomp as he spoke, the Dragon-type squealing happily. "Beyond having some fun, testing yourself with strong opponents will require you to push your bond with Charizard to the limits, and that could be an useful source of data on Mega Evolution. Ferrum is known to have a power similar to it, one that reportedly exists only within the region."

The last few words caught Alain's attention more than anything else, a familiar series of memories playing back in his mind. The teen frowned, edging closer to the professor.

"Is there any connection between them?" he asked, a hand over his own Keystone.

"I'm not sure, but that's what research is for." Sycamore laughed out, arms folded over his chest. "And besides, if they are inviting some

strong trainers for it, *he* is likely to be there, as well."

It was obvious who he was referring to, and the simple prospect was enough to send his heartbeat skyrocketing. It had been just a short while since their last meeting, but Alain was still interested to know how the one opponent that proved to be better than him even after defeat had been doing, and maybe even confronting him again, see if anything between them changed. That prospect was enough to make the tournament feel worthwhile.

And if it helped to make Mairin happy and the professor to pursue a new topic of research, what was there to lose?

At that realization, Alain finally smiled, observing the invitation one last time before nodding at his two dearest people.

"Alright then. I'll enter this tournament."

Sycamore just gave him an approving nod, while both Mairin and Chespie wore matching giddy grins with fists pumped up.

"Yes! You will defeat everyone on your path, Alain!" Mairin said, punching the sky.

"Pin pin!" Chespie emulated his trainer as he swallowed the macaron.

Alain barely suppressed a chuckle, while Sycamore stood up from his chair, adjusting his labcoat as he strode out of the room.

"Very well. I'll need to make a few arrangements and call someone to help out with the technical know how, and then we'll be able to depart." While Alain had no idea who or what he was referring to, the relaxed tone made him think it was probably a known someone.

Before Alain could hazard any guesses, Mairin had hopped over the table, pointing skyward proudly. "Whoo-hoo! Get ready, Ferrum, we're co-"

The girl quickly lost her balance and almost fell over to the ground, if not for the quick intervention of a pair of vines that caught her at the last second. Chespie gently placed his trainer down, but not without a stern look and a sigh.

"Pin..." The Chespin shook his head, retracting his vines in as he grabbed and ate another macaron.

"Thanks, Chespie..." Mairin rubbed her neck, smiling sheepishly.

Alain shook his head as well, almost too used to do it. "You need to be more careful. Chespie can't be there to pick you up forever."

"I am careful!" Mairin folded her arms, fuming. "It's just that stuff keeps getting on the way of my feet!"

The teen had to really hold back another chuckle as Mairin and Chespie started talking of her tripping habits, really letting loose of all tension building up inside him. Being there, around the people he cared about, really helped to make his burden that bit less heavy. He couldn't believe that he once thought being away from them was the best way to protect them from harm, in his foolish attempt to help them.

Alain shook his fists, his gaze serious. He had committed many mistakes in the past, losing himself in his pursuit of power, but he also got the chance to make up for them. No matter what would've happened in that tournament, he wouldn't have made the same mistakes once again.

As Serena entered her room inside the Slateport City Pokémon Center, she finally allowed herself to sigh and let the fatigue of the day catch up to her, falling right ontop of the comfy-enough bed. While Pokémon Contests were as fun as Showcases, that didn't mean she wouldn't get tired by the end of the day. Especially when her ribbon case remained empty once more.

In the meantime, her team of Pokémon all rushed at her side, concern drawn on their faces as they hopped next to her.

"Cham pan pan!" Pancham patted her head, grinning stubbornly.

"Sylvie!" Sylveon wrapped her feelers around Serena's arm, sticking by her side.

"Brai braixen!" Braixen just gave her a hug, sharing her warmth the best she could.

Seeing her team all doing what they could to cheer her up, Serena mustered enough strength to smile, bringing her team into a hug all at once.

"It's okay, you were all amazing. Don't feel bad about how this Contest went," she said.

Her three Pokémon nodded along, and they all hugged Serena back. No further words were needed between them, simply sharing their sadness and resolve at once, knowing they were there for each other. And in that moment, that was all they needed.

And as she held her team close to her, Serena thought back of the Contest. At first, it started nicely: due to their similarities with Showcases, the Appeal round was pretty much a non-issue for her team, and she had a lot of fun experimenting with new routines and ways to showcase her team's charms. Even if she couldn't dance and take part in the routines like in Kalos, she still felt to be as much part of the performance as her team.

Her downfall had been once again in the battle portion, against a woman named Savannah. A sweet person, a single mother that only occasionally took part in Contests mostly for fun, but that was clearly far more attuned to fighting and showing off at once. For all the battling and adventuring Serena had done throughout the journey in Kalos, her battling skills had never been anything more than functional.

And that showed in the end result, where Savannah managed to win by knocking Sylveon out, while Serena could barely put a dent on her Lairon. She won her ribbon fair and square, proving to be better than her in spite of the clear gap in experience.

Truth be told, Serena wasn't too upset about the end result; one of the qualities of a Kalos Queen was to be able to smile even in defeat, after all, and she still had plenty of fun facing Savannah on the stage. Every defeat was an opportunity to grow even further, stronger than before.

But it also served as a harsh reminder of what she lacked, and what she needed to improve on. Only by truly improving her craft and her ability to make people happy she would *really* be able to crown her dream, and the road ahead had never seemed so unsteady, or uncertain. And the fact she had no idea how her battling would help her once back home didn't help matters.

She sighed once again, but she quickly tightened her grip around her Pokémon, unsure of what to think.

Her train of thoughts, however, were quickly interrupted as a short, peppy tune started to play over and over around the room. Serena perked her head up to the room's table, where she could spot her PokéNav vibrating for an incoming call. Sylveon sent one of her feelers to grab it and gently offered it to her trainer. Serena pressed the Nav's button and started the call immediately.

"Hello, who's calling?" she asked right away.

"Hey there, Serena. It's been a while."

Serena flinched for a second, immediately picturing a certain sassy blue-haired performer on the other end of the call, smirking to herself. She smiled a bit as she adjusted her position.

"Miette! How are things going?" Serena asked, her whole team coming closer to listen as well.

"Pretty good, the Showcase season is just starting, and I've already managed to win one Princess Key." Serena could feel the sense of accomplishment in her friend's voice, and her drive to do better than the previous time. It was something the performer could relate to.

"What about you? How is your little Contest jaunt going?"

Serena rubbed her neck, gulping down some embarrassment. "It's doing... well, I suppose."

"You're not doing well, right."

Serena would've normally shot a glare at her, but she couldn't deny a true statement. She sighed and gripped her PokéNav tightly.

"I guess so." Serena looked over at the sheets, brushing over Braixen's fur absentmindedly. "They seem similar, but Showcases and Contests have a lot of differences. I wonder if this is really going to help me become the Kalos Queen."

"Oh, cut this out. My rival isn't allowed to think so poorly of herself." Serena perked her head up, only for Miette to chuckle out. "Plus, I don't think men find self-loathing women that attractive. Maybe my chances are higher than I thought..."

"Miette!" Serena's cheeks flushed red, her three Pokémon all jumping out at the shrill cry.

Miette just laughed out some more. "You might grow all you want, but you're still the same Serena underneath."

The honey-blond performer rolled her eyes, with no words to say. At times, she really wasn't sure how to classify Miette, though if nothing else talking with her never got boring.

Fortunately, the other performer dropped her jokey tone right away. "But if you think this is not helping you out, what about a break from Contests? I think that might do you good."

"A break?" Serena perked an eyebrow, puzzled.

"Yeah, a chance to relax and maybe try something different. I think I know just the thing, too."

Serena wasn't sure how much she could really trust an idea coming from Miette, but with no alternatives in mind beyond persevering in her Contests, she couldn't deny her curiosity. Thus, she adjusted her PokéNav with interest. "What do you have in mind?"

"Have you ever heard of the Iron League tournament in the Ferrum region?"

"I don't think so. What is it?"

"It's a battle competition in a region not too far from Kalos, sort of like a League but not exactly like Kalos' one." The mention of the Kalos League couldn't help but make Serena tense up, the memories of their fight afterwards still lingering. Thankfully, Miette was quick to continue. "Anyway, the event's gonna be a big deal, and they're inviting strong trainers from all over to come and take part in it. And according to a recent PokéVision, Aria is also going to be there."

"Really?" Serena's eyes widened, her interest peaking. She hadn't paid too much attention about what the current Kalos Queen had been up to in the last few weeks, something she was regretting already.

"Apparently she was called in as a guest of honor. Not sure if she's actually gonna do any battling." Miette's tone turned serious again, far more than she had been until then. "But since my goal is to eventually surpass her, I want to see what our Kalos Queen is gonna do. Plus, who knows, maybe this tournament could even be fun to take part in. Want to go to Ferrum together and see what this will be about?"

Miette's offer gave Serena pause. So, her friend's plan was to watch and maybe take part in a battle tournament? It sounded quite

strange, considering how Showcases made a point to be a way to bond with Pokémon outside of traditional battling. That was also why she was having so many problems with the battle portions of Contests, after all.

And yet, as Serena thought about battles and League, she couldn't help but think of someone. How he strived to improve himself with every battle he took part in, how he truly put all of himself in every challenge he faced, and how battling and meeting other trainers had helped him improve himself. She knew how important battles were for him, and how they helped him become the person he was. Maybe trying the path he choose for herself could've been good for her.

But that would've still required her to leave Hoenn, even for a brief while, after resolving to go there to improve as a performer. Wouldn't leave for another region just mean it wasn't the right path for her? That she had lost sight of what her actual goal was? After she proudly declared to the others what her next goal was, it sounded more than a little hypocritical.

She looked down, passing a hand through her hair as she continued to think. "I'm not too sure."

Miette didn't answer immediately, and Serena wondered if she was surprised by her words. Maybe her rival expected her to be far more sure of herself by now. However, it didn't take long for Miette to clear her throat.

"You know, since it's a battle thing, maybe *a certain someone* is also going to take part in it. But if you don't want to come, I guess I can make my-"

"Don't even think of it!" Serena snapped out, almost making Pancham and Sylveon fall on the floor.

"Jeez, I can't even see you and I can tell you're blushing redder than a Tamato Berry."

Serena couldn't deny that, simply turning the other way, all while imagining the smug and pleased grin Miette was probably wearing. The embarrassment as Miette laughed was too much for Serena to say anything in response, as her Pokémon gave a collective sigh of their own.

The performer was more than a bit happy when she stopped, her tone turning friendly. "But seriously, I think some new air is gonna do you good. What do you think?"

Serena took a few shallow breaths, barely managing to stop her heart from racing as she considered the idea. Regardless of if the 'certain someone' would show up or not, such a decision still relied on her and what she needed to do. Miette did raise some good points, after all, and maybe that could be exactly what she needed to get better at Contests. She couldn't really know until she tried, but she also knew that wasn't a decision she could really take on her own.

And so she turned to her team, staring into Braixen's, Pancham's and Sylveon's eyes. Still gripping at her PokéNav, she smiled at her trio of performers. "What do you say, do you think we should try?"

Pancham crossed his arms, while Sylveon raised a feeler. Braixen, instead, took her wand out and held it high, the ribbon they placed on it long before in full display. The meaning was clear, especially when all three members of her little troupe nodded and smiled at once.

Serena smiled back at them, and for just a moment all her doubts melted away. "Why not. I'm in."

Even if she couldn't see it, Serena could still picture Miette beaming on the other end of the call.

"Great! I actually already booked you a plane ticket to Ferrum, so it would've been a shame if you refused. Let's see each other at Lumiose's airport first, alright?"

"Alright. See you soon, Miette."

And with that, Miette's call ended as quick as it started. Serena flopped back down the bed, letting the Nav slip over the sheets as she yawned out her tiredness with a smile. For how much she loved to tease, Serena could safely say that her rival was enough of a friend where it counted.

She couldn't say yet if taking a trip to Ferrum was a good idea or not, but if her Pokémon were willing to support her on her journey, then it was worth a shot. She might've questioned what she gained, but deep down she knew that nothing they did was pointless. He taught that to her, after all, and after the promises they shared the last time they spoke Serena couldn't afford to worry too much, regardless of what was going to happen.

Thinking about the future and what was to come, Serena could feel her fatigue eased up, replaced by a drive to improve. The performer sat up and pumped her fists, smiling once again. If she were to meet Miette again, she couldn't afford to look sloppy or off her game, after all. And if there was even the slightest chance for him to be there too, then she had even more reason to stay sharp.

Serena turned back to her team, confidence flowing back into her. "Let's train a bit, alright?"

All of her team cheered at once, and no more words were needed as Serena hopped of the bed and went for the Pokémon Center's battlefield, ready to hone their skills.

She had no idea how that trip to Ferrum was going to turn out, but something told her that no matter what, it wouldn't be something easy to forget.

Hello, everyone! It's been a while since I last posted a story here, and to celebrate the occasion, I've decided to debut with my first personal project in quite a while. This one has been

simmering for a while, but with Generation VIII about to start in less than a month, I thought it best to start posting it already.

This little project aims to be a bit of a 'direct sequel' to the XY series of the Pokémon Anime, continuing right where the series left off and dealing with a few of its loose ends, alongside furthering the development of the main and supporting cast in ways that I hope will be interesting to follow. I thought the simple story of Pokkén Tournament could lend itself well to exploring some Anime elements in an organic way, and thus this story was born. I plan several curveballs along the way, however, so I hope the read will remain engaging even for people who already played the game and know how the plot should unfold.

The plan of this story has been set in stone around the midpoint of the Sun & Moon series and predated the reveal of Sword & Shield by quite a bit, so any comparison between Galar and my portrayal of the Ferrum region are likely just a coincidence. Hopefully I'll manage to make Ferrum distinct enough from the Galar players will eventually explore even if they're built on similar concepts. As a result of the planning, some later events of Sun & Moon ended up slightly going at odds with a few bits of plan, and while I don't think it's anything major, I'll give precedence to my vision rather than keeping everything matching up to canon perfectly. I have, however, no interest in bashing Sun & Moon or deliberately contradicting it: this story is going to follow its own path, and Alola as portrayed in the Anime will likely have very little influence on it.

This story is part of the same universe of my two one-shots A Simple Call Between Friends and Walking the Path to the Future, being set just a bit after the former and several years before the latter, albeit neither is absolutely necessary to read to understand this story's plot. This is just the first piece of a larger story I wish to tell, but I'll make sure to make it a satisfying and fun read on its own terms. One of my major

inspirations behind this story has definitely been the Ancienverse by the author Epicocity, an excellent Amourshipping series of stories that I heavily recommend to anyone in search of a good action adventure romp with good plot and characters, but I'll do my best to give my work its own unique identity and style all the same. On a related note, while Amourshipping will be a part of the story, I'm going to try and develop it at a realistic pace, staying loyal to where XY left the characters off and building from there.

As of now, four chapters have been written for this story, while several others have been planned. As a way to gauge interest and introduce the entire prologue section of the story, I'll post the next three chapters in the span of the next two weeks or so, before taking a brief hiatus to prepare a new batch of chapters. I will definitely give priority to quality over speed, but I'll make sure to keep a good and hopefully consistent rhythm to release the future chapters. This is a project I absolutely want to see to the end, and I hope the road will be a fun one to walk together.

I thank Epicocity, Jam, and several other people for helping me in polishing up this chapter and for their support in seeing this story blossom into a full work. Hopefully, I'll continue to match and hopefully surpass your expectations in the future.

Until the new update next week, I thank everyone for their interest already, and look forward to your thoughts! Have a nice time!

Reunions in Ferrum

After their last few journeys led them to take a plane to the next region they would visit, Ash and Pikachu had made it into a habit to look out of the window to the scenery below them from time to time, just after departure and right before landing in particular. They had never been particularly happy or productive staying in the same place for too long, and being able to see the regions from above was a breathtaking summary and preview of their adventures.

After receiving his invitation, Ash didn't waste time to jump on the first airplane after saying goodbye to his Pokémon, Professor Oak, Tracey and his mother, all cheering him and Pikachu on as they got ready for the next step of their journey. Departing for a new region was always a sort of bittersweet experience, but his desire to see and know more of the world always won out against the sadness of leaving others behind. And the fact that for once they were actively seeking his presence rather than him stumbling on a new region to go to only helped making him more curious of what to expect.

And seeing the Ferrum region from above was definitely a great reminder of why he loved to go to new places. He could see many cities, forests and landmarks from the window as the plane slowly neared the airport for landing, and that only led Ash's mind to race of what they could be for, which kind of people could they meet, and how much fun was going to await him and Pikachu. The fact that Ferrum was so close to Kalos was also a welcome plus, reminding him of all the fun he had in his previous adventure, with hopes of the next one being just as awesome.

"So, we're almost there," Ash said, scratching Pikachu's head as he adjusted his seat. Trainer and Pokémon exchanged grins. "Whatever challenge awaits us there, let's do our best, alright?"

"Pi-pikachu!" the Electric-type thumped his chest, nodding back.

Ash's smile only widened as his attention shifted back to the approaching ground. A few minutes later, the airplane finally landed, with the speakers announcing their arrival to the Neos City International Airport. Ash and Pikachu all but rushed out of airplane as soon as they could, shuffling around the airport's corridors as they checked their surroundings in awe. Sure, Professor Oak told Ash that he wasn't likely going to find many Pokémon he hadn't seen before in Ferrum and so far the hallways didn't look any different than any other airport he visited, but neither thing put a damper on his enthusiasm.

The boy quickly grabbed the invitation letter he received, smiling all the while. He didn't do much research on what that 'Iron League tournament' would entail, but the mere mention of Ferrum being 'the land where the strongest trainers gather' and promising a challenge no other region offered him yet was enough to drive him forward. After reaching the finals of a League Conference for the first time, he knew that he couldn't slack off, especially not after the promise he made to Serena in their first call after their Kalos journey.

Adjusting his backpack and with Pikachu on his shoulder, Ash walked forward through the barren hallways, passing through the required flight checks and entering the main part of the airport. He caught sight of several ad bumpers and screens along the way flashing all kinds of informations. Advertisements for the latest model of 'Battle AR', rankings of trainers, and promotions for the upcoming Iron League tournament and 'League Masters' and 'Grand Master' in particular caught his interest, really making him yearn to know more of that region.

But nothing of what he was seeing caught his interest more than what he heard just a few steps inside the airport.

"Gardevoir, Magical Leaf!"

"Lucario, dodge it and Aura Sphere!"

The familiar calls and intensity were enough for Ash to freeze, his curiosity peaking as he turned to his side. Pikachu hopped off his shoulder and darted that way, and Ash was quick to pace after him. The anonymous hallways quickly opened up in a large room, leading the way towards a secluded battlefield, not unlike the one he and Clemont had used before he left Kalos. Inside stood two trainers, a boy commanding the Lucario and a girl the Gardevoir, both wearing strange devices over their ears as they ordered their Pokémon. There were other passerbys gathered to observe the battle, including a brown-haired woman with a Weavile at her side, and a teen in blue with a bird-like Pokémon Ash didn't recall to have seen before, among many other people and Pokémon, from tiny Machop to oversized Gengar, all seemingly waiting for the fight to end to make use of the battlefield themselves.

But Ash's attention was quickly focused on the two fighters and their match. The Lucario leapt away from the storm of leaves as he charged its Aura to fire it towards the Gardevoir. She twirled out of the way, shimmering with a Calm Mind before firing yet another projectile. The Aura Sphere clashed against Gardevoir's attack, only for it to split and zone faster towards Lucario, forcing the Fighting-type to leap back. He tried to ram forward, only for Gardevoir to teleport out of the way, right ontop of Lucario and dropping on him. The Fighting-type's arm blocked her attack, and both Pokémon traded determined grins as they fought.

Ash and Pikachu were completely mesmerized by the two as they disengaged and went against each other again, trading ranged attacks and close combat moves in equal amounts faster than he could follow. It was a far quicker exchange of moves than he was used to, similar yet different than a lot of battles he saw. He couldn't put a finger on what was actually different, but it only added to his interest in seeing who would win in the end.

"Incredible, isn't it? Battle trainers really know their stuff when it comes to fighting."

Ash almost jumped at the unknown voice, quickly turning around. At his side now stood the woman he saw, dressed in a rather elegant black uniform with long brown hair, with her Weavile waving his arm and munching out a bag of chips. She adjusted her glasses with interest, before her attention went back to the match. "The Lucario is going to win now."

The boy blinked, his attention going back to the battle, the Lucario constantly dodging attacks as Gardevoir didn't give him any time to hit back. Ash more than anyone else knew how one shouldn't take the result of a battle for granted, but he wasn't really able to see how the Fighting-type could win.

And yet, just as Gardevoir teleported away and readied a Moonblast, Lucario leapt out of the way, paw on the ready and an Aura Sphere quickly charging in his hand. The Gardevoir quickly dispelled her move, appearing above him once more.

Just in time for Lucario to fire the Aura Sphere skyward, engulfing the Psychic/Fairy-type completely. Gardevoir screamed, her body blown back. Lucario was quick on the uptake, leaping forward and above Gardevoir. He slammed his foot on her head, and the female Pokémon cratered to the ground.

She tried to stand back up, a shimmer of Calm Mind setting up her next hit.

And then Lucario rocketed towards her with a giant Aura Sphere, and she never got the chance to hit back as the energy attack exploded point-blank in her face. Gardevoir fell down, and didn't rise back up. She laid on the ground, defeated.

Even after being told in advance, Ash couldn't help but be surprised as the result. He continued to observe as both trainers recalled their Pokémon and shook hands before they went their own way, all while the woman smiled proudly at the display of sportmanship.

"What a great battle. I sure hope to see those two again," she said, following both trainers with her eyes. Her Weavile nodded between chips.

Ash's attention went back to the woman, head tilted. "How did you know who was going to win?"

"I've seen enough battle trainers to know a thing or two about them." The woman chuckled and adjusted her glasses, checking out the boy and his Pikachu. "Let me guess, is this your first time in Ferrum?"

Ash nodded, producing the letter. "Yeah, they wanted me for the tournament."

The woman's eyes lit up as she observed the piece of paper, her smile widening.

"So you're one of the invited trainers! That's wonderful news!" She turned back towards the battlefield without losing her grin. "Did you enjoy what you saw?"

Ash quickly did the same, staring at the now empty field. It didn't take him long to smile again, the battle replaying in his mind.

"It was everything a great Pokémon battle should be. Trainers and Pokémon both doing their best together." He turned to Pikachu and rubbed his chin, his partner squealing happily as a result. "It's the kind of battle me and all of my Pokémon strive for."

The woman traded a knowing glance with her Weavile, arms on her hips as she walked closer to Ash. "That's exactly the right mindset for someone visiting Ferrum. Challengers like you are always welcome."

She offered a hand to him, which Ash gladly took with his own, a smile lighting up his face as he felt a kinship with the woman ahead of him.

"Thanks. I just try to do my best as a Pokémon trainer." His smile grew wider as he shook the woman's hand. "By the way, my name is Ash Ketchum, from Pallet Town. And this is my partner Pikachu."

"Pika!" Ash's partner leapt off his shoulder, raising a paw to the duo.

The woman nodded in return. "Pleased to meet you. I'm Nia, and this guy here is my Weavile."

"Vile!" Nia's Pokémon gave them a toothy smirk, taking a chip and offering it to Pikachu. The Electric-type took and ate it in one bite, squeaking with glee before trading a high five with the other Pokémon. Ash suspected the fact they were ketchup-flavored chips had something to do with it. He and Nia couldn't help but giggle at once at the scene.

Nia was quick to turn serious afterwards, glancing at their surroundings. "Say, did you come alone?"

"Yeah. I was heading to Neos City now."

Nia's smile turned even wider as she turned to the other corridor. "I'm going there for the Iron League tournament's entrance ceremony, too. I can be your guide to the region in the meantime, if you want."

A familiar, pleasant feeling filled Ash at that request. He pumped his fist as his smile matched Nia's. "Sure! There's nothing better than traveling together!"

"Nice to know it." Nia turned around alongside Weavile, beckoning the two to come along. "Let's go, then. There's lots of great stuff waiting for you in this region."

Ash and Pikachu didn't need any more prompting as they paced right after the two, giddy grins on their faces. Even beyond their wanderlust and curiosity, meeting new people was one of the main reasons they loved to travel, forging new friendships and seeing new things.

And so, curious to know what expected them, the Kantonian duo followed after the Ferric one.

"And here we are!" Miette declared, bounding through the hallway of the Neos City International Airport with plenty of excitement and a grin plastered over her face.

Serena paced slowly after her, rubbing her forehead and groaning as she fought back a splitting headache. "You sure are chipper now..."

She sighed, trying to rub away her stress. Two flights in a row, the last of which was spent at the mercy of Miette's teasing for a good couple of hours, were enough to take the energy out of even the most active person. The performer almost envied her Pokémon and how they managed to rest the entire flight tucked inside their Poké Balls.

For her part, Miette turned back to Serena, her grin flashing with determination as she stopped ahead of the honey-blonde. "We are pretty much here to relax and see what Aria is up to. What's not to like?"

Serena shook her head, exhaling and at least trying to recover her smile and disposition, just like a future Kalos Queen needed to be. Her eyes quickly fell to a screen promoting the upcoming Iron League tournament, and her attempt at a smile faltered right away, tensing up on the spot.

"I'm still not really sure if we can really gain much from a battle tournament." She turned away from Miette, fists clenched and lips pursed. "I'm not opposed to try, but-"

She was forced to stop by an open palm and an annoyed glare by her friend. Once Serena went quiet, Miette exhaled and folded her arms, giving to the other performer an almost disappointed glance.

"You really should stop overthinking it." She stepped closer, staring at Serena right in the eyes. "Even if a performer doesn't necessarily need to battle, we're still required to possess a variety of different skills that show our bond with Pokémon, on the stage as much as off. You remember that dance party, right?"

"Of course." It was hard to forget the occasion where Sylveon evolved, after all, and when she *almost* had a chance to share a dance with Ash. Though, given how that ended up for everyone else, maybe missing up on that didn't turn out to be so bad.

Miette seemed to read her mind as she chuckled to herself with a sly grin. "Make sure Ash takes some dance lessons. Your feet will thank me."

"I tried to teach him once." Serena grumbled a bit, only to scratch her arm and look away. "It didn't go too well."

Both performers shared a laugh at that, with Serena instinctively rubbing her blue ribbon in apology. She knew they weren't actually making fun of Ash and she appreciated the levity, but she sure hoped he wouldn't be offended by her remark. Next time they'd met, she definitely needed to help him put a patch on his dancing.

Her friend was quick to drop the laugh however, looking apprehensive as she put her hands on her hips. "But really, you don't need to think too much about how and if this will help you or not. If it does, great, but at worst it's gonna give you a bit of a break from your routine."

"I know." Serena kept her gaze away, balling her fists. "I guess I'm just tense for the future."

When she finally turned around, she was welcomed by the half-lidded and annoyed stare of Miette, her friend saying nothing. The silence hung for a few heavy seconds before her fellow performer gave a sigh of her own.

"Serena, please, you were the one that almost won the Master Class. I entrusted my dream to you for a reason." She jabbed at Serena's chest, her stare sharpened. "If I want to be the Kalos Queen, I need to surpass you and Aria both. Don't you dare think you're not up to snuff until I finally defeat you."

Miette continued to stare right at Serena, and looking into her eyes the performer found herself unable to reply. At least, until the meaning of her friend- her *rival* 's words became clear, melting away her uncertainty.

Serena gave Miette a challenging stare, grabbing the other performer's hand in a tight grip as she smiled confidently. "That's only if you manage to do it. I have no intention to ever lose against you."

"That's what I wanted to hear." The other performer replied with just as much confidence, smirking back at Serena. "No matter what happens here in Ferrum, once we're both back in Kalos, let's both aim for the top. Best girl wins."

"Of course." Serena's smile softened and grew brighter, even if her eyes didn't lose her spark. "Thanks, Miette."

"Hey, don't sweat it. I just want the best for my rival." Miette winked back to her, before she turned her attention to further down the hallway. "So, let's reach Neos City for this entrance event, alright?"

"Alright." Serena nodded, and both girls let go of their hands, the promise still firmly held between both.

Both performers walked together through the hallway until it finally made way for a large connecting area heading in several directions, with Miette taking the lead and looking for the correct way out. And as she did so, Serena clutched at her ribbon, thinking of what had just happened.

It wasn't like her to let doubts stop her that way, not anymore. The time when a hurdle on the road was enough to make her quit was long gone by now, and all she had to do was try harder and do her best, just like she always did. Be it Contests, Showcases or something different, it didn't matter; one way or another she would've made it and reached her dream. She almost wanted to laugh at how she lost track of something so easy to remember. All she needed to do was to always do her best with her Pokémon, and always keep her eyes on the future.

And maybe ahead of her, given she ended up slamming right into another person, sending both falling down the floor.

The sudden hit snapped Serena out of her thoughts as she massaged her forehead. She caught sight of the other person, a young girl wearing a full gray cloak, with blonde hair peeking out of the hood.

She winced and stood back up, offering a hand to the girl. "Sorry, I wasn't looking. I-"

"It's okay. I must go."

Without further word, the girl stood back up and rushed ahead, shooting straight for one of the many hallways. Serena looked after her, speechless. The girl seemed to be escaping from something, or maybe someone, but there didn't seem to be anyone around them. Why was she running like that, then?

"Serena, is everything alright?"

The honey-blonde turned back ahead, where Miette was tapping her foot and waiting for her, almost unconcerned for what happened. She instinctively tried to look for the other girl again, only to find her gone. Questions about her continued to swirl in Serena's mind, but she quickly put a stop to them as she shook her head and adjusted her backpack, facing her rival once more.

"I'm alright, don't worry." She smiled, focusing back on the matter at hand.

That seemed good enough for Miette, as the girl nodded. "Let's go then, this airport is huge and we can't afford to get lost."

Serena nodded as well, and both performers walked onward, ready to see what Ferrum had in store for them.

As the exit grew nearer with each step and the hallways made way to larger areas connecting to the rest of the airport, Ash's attention shifted from his still-barren yet moderately crowded surroundings to his current guide, talking of anything that came to their mind. It all had started with a comment she made on Pikachu, and slowly moved on to Ash's career and his training style. Nia seemed quite interested in him and Ash was happy to provide all details, their shared love for Pokémon battles clear.

She folded her arms, observing him with a grin. "So, you were the runner-up of the recent Lumiose Conference. That's an impressive achievement for your age."

"Thanks, but me and my team can still improve even more." Ash glanced over at Pikachu, walking ahead of him and sharing the bag of chips with Weavile. He pumped his fist with a confident smirk. "And that's why we're here to win the Iron League tournament!"

"You've got spunk, I like it." Nia adjusted her glasses, her attention going back to a nearby screen showing a 'Battle AR' commercial. "Things in Ferrum are a bit different than in other regions, however. I think you noticed that already."

"It's due to those weird things you wear on your ears?" Ash asked, his attention going to the device Nia also wore. He then rubbed his chin in thought. "Well, and the battle flow looked faster than usual, I guess."

Nia gave a nod, her smile turning brighter as she faced the boy again. "The Ferrum region has always been one where people and Pokémon work together, in battle and outside. This means in a battle, we value teamwork and coordination while focusing on one-on-one bouts, valuing pure skill over types and other things you usually see in other regional championships."

"You don't think about those?" Ash crooked his eyebrow, his curiosity increased. Even Pikachu turned around, mouth stuffed of ketchup-flavored chips.

"You could say we take a different approach to them." Nia's smile only widened, holding a finger up as she continued to explain. "The battle trainers of Ferrum need to prove themselves capable to face any other opponent like equals, without a safety net to fall back on. We fight and grow together as one, as strong as unbending steel, as a friend of mine likes to say."

Ash's eyes went to the grey pavement and the various decorative plants surrounding the area, reflecting on Nia's words. Trainers and Pokémon working together, and fighting on and winning with skill alone; the idea of fighting without taking into account types and the like sounded unusual, but for him far from unfamiliar.

The boy smiled, a familiar rush of excitement washing over his body. He was never one to shy from a challenge, and that seemed tailored exactly for him.

"That sounds awesome!" Ash smiled back at Nia, fists still balled with glee. The woman chuckled out in response.

"Very. There's nothing quite like a Ferrum battle around the world." She punched her open palm, her grin splitting her face. "It's you, your Pokémon and the opponents! No time to dawdle or waste time, just a thrilling exchange of moves from start to finish! There's never a dull moment, and trainers just put all their strength in to win!"

"You're sure making me want to have a Ferrum battle now." Ash grinned just as much, his excitement only growing the more his personal checkboxes were ticked. And so, he stepped forward and sent Nia a challenging stare. "Are you a battle trainer too? I'd love to fight your Weavile!"

In response Nia tapped her cheek in thought, almost as if considering it. She traded a glance with Weavile, and then they both grinned and let out a good-natured jiggle. Ash and Pikachu both blinked at that.

"Sorry, you'd have nothing to gain from fighting me. I'm nothing special." She stopped giggling shortly after, and Ash couldn't help but grumble a bit at the refusal. It was short-lived, however, as Nia's smiling face once again on Ash. "But your drive is admirable. You love Pokémon battles, right?"

Ash quickly let go of his annoyance, grinning back at the woman and holding his fist high. "You bet! My dream is to become a Pokémon Master, and I intend to travel the world and face every opponent I can until me and my team can make it! We'll fight and win as one!"

"Pikapi chupika!" Pikachu yelled as well, after gulping down a mouthful of chips and rising his own tiny fist.

Nia's expression softened even further, pushing her glasses up as she studied the duo once more. She looked like she wanted to tell them something, but she quickly shifted back to another amused glance.

"Heh heh, you're going to *love* Synergy Burst if that's the case." She continued to check him out, far more pleased than she had already been until then. "And you've got so much excitement. Usually it's only rookies that act like this."

"By now I always treat each region as if it was my first one. There's always something new to know and explore." Ash's gaze went to the window, and to the green fields and blue sky of Ferrum waiting for

him. "And this time, I promised someone to do my best. I can't let her down."

Nia and Weavile both inched closer, their eyes lit up with interest. "Ooooh, is it a promise of love? To see your beloved after your dream is crowned?"

Ash instantly fell silent and froze in place, his mind going back to topics he still hadn't sorted out. He tried to think of a way to say that she maybe was, kinda, sort of, but he wasn't even that sure what Serena was for him, and no real word came in response. For some reason, flat out denying it like he did with Misty and May more than once didn't come as easily, but he couldn't really say she was 'his beloved' either, as he didn't start acting like Brock yet. Serena might've liked him, but they were still *friends* first and foremost.

He tried to look to Pikachu for some help, only for his best friend to shrug. Left with no support, Ash sighed and rubbed his neck, an uneasy smile on his face as his body remained stiff.

"Uhm... well..." He gulped and took a deep breath. Then, he decided to go for what he knew to be true. "I'm not really sure. But she is someone important to me."

Nia and Weavile continued to stare at him. Ash was worried that she would start barraging him of questions about his 'romantic life' now, but thankfully enough she simply laughed off any other questions, arms folded.

"Holding up a promise is always an excellent motivator. I'm sure you're going to be a force to be reckoned with in the Iron League tournament."

With the topic now back on track, Ash just smiled back. Nia was right: regardless of what Serena meant for him, he still promised to do his best wherever he would go next. And that was what actually mattered in the end.

And then a loud, booming sound drowned out any further attempt at conversation.

Both trainers snapped to attention, as did all the other travelers pacing through the area. Ash's eyes went wide.

"What the-" Everyone's gaze gravitated to one hallway to the left, from which a hefty cloud of smoke was slowly rising. No one around the room dared doing anything, instead murmuring to each other and staring at the smoke.

"Something exploded!"

"Is this an attack?"

"Get away! It's dangerous!"

As the chatter devolved into a jumbled mess of people talking over each other the passerbys clustered away from the smoke, some of them running away or hugging each other in concern. The lack of any sound or update on what was going on only made the tension higher, all the gathered people pale and nervous for the lack of answers.

But Ash was different. He balled his fists tightly, frowning in the smoke's direction before he glanced over to Pikachu. "Let's go!"

Ash's trusty partner leapt back on the boy's shoulder, and Ash rushed for the hallway right into the smoke, covering his mouth but keeping his eyes open as he ran for the smoke's source. By the steps he heard Nia and Weavile were probably doing the same behind him, but he kept his focus ahead.

The smoke cloud was thick and hard to breath through, but the boy and his Pokémon still made their way through the hallway until they reached another, larger transitionary room, most of it still clouded in even thicker smoke. Even as it slowly cleared up, it was hard to make up the room itself beyond some shapes further inside.

Ash stopped midway in, coughing into his hand as he heard the others stopping next to him, squinting his eyes in the fading smoke. Pikachu frowned and sparked his cheek, ready to fight if necessary.

"What's going on here?" Ash asked, his stare growing harsher, laying in wait as the smoke continued to clear, expecting anything to come out as Nia and Weavile did the same.

But he sure didn't expect someone's arms to grab him at the waist and hug him tightly, making him almost jump in surprise.

"Ash! It's you!"

It was a familiar, cheerful voice, and one Ash managed to piece almost immediately. Both him and Pikachu widened their eyes.

"Pika?" As if needing an extra confirmation, Pikachu sparked his cheeks, letting out a low voltage Thunderbolt into the smoke. It was immediately redirected behind him and Ash, absorbed by something. Or rather, *someone* .

"Denene!" The cry of the tiny orange Pokémon was all the proof the duo needed. Ash turned around, the smoke clearing enough to allow him to make out the shape of the short, blonde little girl currently hugging him. One he had learned to know well in the last few months.

"Bonnie?" Ash asked, blinking in confusion.

The little girl flashed a grin, only hugging the boy tighter, while Dedenne did the same to Pikachu. "I'm so happy to see you again!"

Ash couldn't help but smile back at her, but before he could return her hug, his mind connected the dots of what happened, his attention going back to the people ahead of them inside the fading smoke.

"Wait, then that means..." He didn't even need to finish his sentence as the smoke finally cleared enough to make out a very familiar boy with blond hair and a blue jumpsuit, currently covered in soot and wearing a rather disheartened expression.

He exhaled, shaking his head. "I was sure this time it would work..."

The cloud of smoke finally faded away, revealing his friend Clemont standing in front of his still fuming backpack ontop of a table, with an Officer Jenny looking much like the ones he met in Kalos staring at him in utter confusion. They seemed to be in the middle of a baggage check, with many other items surrounding the two. A short distance away, a good number of other people was looking over the scene with no words. In hindsight, what happened suddenly made sense.

The tension gone, Ash couldn't help but smile giddily a hand raised alongside Pikachu as they shifted between both siblings. "Clemont! Bonnie! I didn't expect to see you here!"

Clemont snapped back to attention, adjusting his glasses and turning to the other boy. He flinched in recognition right after.

"Wait, Ash?" His smile widened until it was as big as Bonnie's, quickly rushing towards him. "Ash!"

Even with how much he disliked running, Clemont was quick to cover the distance and hug Ash tightly just like Bonnie did, with the Kantonian trainer hugging both siblings as well, his smile matching theirs as Pikachu returned Dedenne's own hug. They really didn't need to tell each other anything else, simply enjoying the moment together.

After few seconds that felt much longer, Ash loosened his grip on the two, turning back to Clemont in particular. "I'm happy to meet you again. But why are you in Ferrum?"

"That's on me."

The new voice was just as familiar as the two siblings', and facing his left the trainer could see a suave black-haired man walking closer to them from mass of the gathered people on the side. After meeting his two friends, Ash was only slightly surprised to see him.

"Professor Sycamore!"

The Professor nodded along, walking closer to the boy with a pleased smirk. "Nice to see you, Ash."

Ash nodded back, knowing no words were needed. It felt weird to be surrounded by so many known faces all at once, but a part of him was aware of the likely reason.

Clemont was quick to ask the obvious question, adjusting his glasses once more. "You're here for that Iron League tournament thing, right?"

"Yeah, I've been invited." The boy extricated himself from the hugs, grabbing his own letter of invitation as proof. He quickly faced his Gym Leader friend again. "Were you called to take part in it too?"

"Not quite. I'm just here because the Professor needed a tech assistant."

"Yeah, it's Alain that was invited, and given I could deal with some research work here, I decided to tag along." Sycamore gave a sheepish grin as he turned to Clemont's friend on the table, just a bit embarrassed. "But Clemont's backpack had set off some alarms and the security wanted to check it thoroughly, so I remained behind while Alain and Mairin left for Neos City."

"They had a point about the danger, in the end..." Clemont groaned once again, head hung down as he faced the Jenny again, bowing to her. "I apologize for what happened here."

The Jenny seemed stumped on what to tell the inventor, her eyes still scrutinizing his backpack while shifting towards the blond boy.

She squinted towards him, and ultimately settled on giving a shrug and an exasperated sigh.

"Well, it didn't go exactly like I expected, but it doesn't seem like you've got anything else of dangerous. I think you can pass now." She turned around and strode away from the group, shaking her head. "It's better if I go and tell people to not worry now."

As he followed the rather grumpy Jenny with his eyes, Clemont forced a tense grin as he scratched his neck. "Thanks, I guess..."

The police officer didn't reply, simply going along her way. Ash would've probably questioned if what she did was legal or not if his attention wasn't still on Professor Sycamore's words; much like him, Alain had been invited to take part in the tournament.

It made sense and was to be expected, but that didn't mean he wasn't happy to know one of the strongest trainers he ever faced was also in Ferrum. Adrenaline coursed in Ash's veins as he thought of the possibility to face Alain again, and just what other trainer of the same level of skill he could face along the way. He had no idea what to expect, but that only made him even more eager to know about his future opponents.

His face was split into a large grin, something that earned him an approving glance by Bonnie. "You're all fired up for the tournament, right?"

"You can be sure of it! And if Alain's going to be one of the opponents, even better!" Ash's grin only grew wider, punching the sky in excitement.

Clemont gave his friend a good-natured smile. "Just as expected from you."

Ash chuckled back, already feeling at ease with his two old friends just like in their previous adventure. It was only then that Ash remembered of the one person next to him to not have been in

Kalos, and turned to see Nia and Weavile striding closer to them, curiosity glimmering in their eyes.

"Are they friends of yours?" Nia asked, glancing over the two siblings. Ash nodded, giving both parties enough space for some proper introductions.

"Guys, this is Nia and her Weavile. Nia, they're Clemont and Bonnie." He slung his arms across both siblings' shoulders, his smile even wider than before. "We've had all sorts of adventures together in Kalos, and they're among my best friends ever."

Clemont turned away, cheeks flushing red in embarrassment. "Come on, there's no need to exaggerate."

"It's true! There's no one capable of making science look amazing like you, and Bonnie is going to become a great Pokémon trainer!"

Clemont continued to blush redder than a Tamato Berry, all while Bonnie puffed her chest in an attempt to look cool with Dedenne doing the same. Both Nia and Sycamore chuckled in amusement, while Ash held two of his dearest friends close to him, remembering all the good times they had spent together. Which only brought attention to what, or rather *who* was missing.

His expression became more forlorn as the memories continued to flood by. It took the boy a few seconds before he realized Nia was staring right at him in mild concern, with Clemont and Bonnie doing the same on the side.

"Something wrong, Ash?" Nia asked, head tilted in tandem with her Weavile.

"Oh, nothing. I was just thinking." Ash rubbed his neck, his gaze still distant. "There was someone else with us in that journey."

"That girl you made a promise with, I assume." Nia frowned slightly, her arms crossed at the waist.

Ash nodded, smiling once more. "I know she's doing her best on her path right now, but with Clemont and Bonnie here, I sort of miss Serena. If only she was-"

"Come on, Miette! The explosion was here!"

Ash and the siblings both jumped upon hearing that. Their attention went to the same hallway the boy had come from, where two *extremely* familiar girls were now rushing through, probably for the same reason Ash had come there.

But of course, Ash was less focused on the why, and more on the fact that a certain honey-blonde girl clad in pink and red was now standing mere feet away from him as she barged in. She looked fierce, determined, and very much not in Hoenn.

"It must've been here, for-" She finally stopped and looked ahead, seeing who else was there with eyes wide open. "Ash?"

"Serena?" Ash asked, almost by reflex.

Trainer and performer remained perfectly still, gazes locked between each other like Deerling in the headlights. No one dared to say anything in the moment, and Ash almost regretted his personal wish ending up so literal.

They both tried to step closer, only to stop midway and remain where they were, almost in sync. Ash swallowed; he knew that Serena was still his friend, and that he didn't need to concern himself for the details of their relationship for the moment, but it was far easier to ignore that when Serena wasn't mere feet away from him. Even with how bold Serena had gotten by now, she seemed to be in a similar boat as him. It was almost comforting to see.

While Ash breathed in and out and looked for a solution, a savior came in the form of Bonnie, tackling the honey-blonde performer into a tight hug. "Serena! You're here too!"

That seemed to snap Serena back to attention, making her turn away from Ash and towards Bonnie and everyone else. Her eyes went even wider, as if she only now understood who else was there.

"Clemont? Bonnie? Professor?" Serena gave them one of her radiant smiles, the awkwardness fading away from her face. "What a nice surprise to meet you here!"

"You too. I thought you would still be doing Contests in Hoenn by now." Clemont crooked an eyebrow in curiosity, with Ash and especially Bonnie quickly joining in.

Serena paled just a bit as the anxiety seemed to come back in full force, forcing a chuckle as she turned the other way. "Well, about that..."

Before she could really say anything, Miette barged in and slung her arm over Serena's shoulders, flashing everyone a cocky grin.

"I roped her in, the girl needs a break from her routine sometimes, you know." She brought Serena closer to her, and Ash could swear she looked more than a bit annoyed for all of a second. For her part, Miette gave a quick wave to the others. "Nice to see you all, guys."

"Hello, Miette." Clemont smiled back alongside Bonnie.

For his part, Ash still didn't know what to say. That only prompted Miette to streak closer to him.

"What's up with the silent treatment, Ash? I thought you'd be happier to see me or Serena." She winked, doing her best attempt at a sultry tone.

Ash jumped on his feet and he stepped forward right after. "Well, I am! I just didn't expect it, is all!"

"But you don't mind it, right?" Bonnie asked, giving Ash a semi-annoyed elbowing.

"Of course not." Ash sighed and shook his head, his attention quickly going back to Serena. And finally, he smiled at her. "I'm glad to see you in person again."

"Same here." Serena gave him a smile of her own, once more.

Neither really said anything right after, but in a way, Ash knew that it didn't matter that much. They were there together, and things would work out somehow. Their smiles were a promise of that, they both knew it. And that was all that actually mattered.

The first to speak afterwards was Professor Sycamore, stroking his chin as he observed everyone. "Meeting all together here is quite a marvelous coincidence."

"Yeah!" Bonnie pumped her fists, a giddy smile litting up her face. "The Kalos crew is back together!"

Clemont shook his head, shooting Bonnie a tired look. "Easy, Bonnie. We've got to help the Professor with his job, remember?"

"Come on, Clemont! Don't you want to travel again with Ash?"

"Of course I want, but we have our work here in Ferrum to deal with first." The inventor sighed, facing his friend and pushing his glasses up in embarrassment. "Don't take it the wrong way Ash, I'd love to tag along with you, but-"

"Hey, it's okay, we all have our priorities." Ash patted his friend's shoulder, giving him a thumbs up. "I just hope you're gonna cheer for me in the tournament."

Clemont seemed far more relieved to hear that, looking back at Ash with confidence. "You don't even have to ask!"

The trainer and the inventor shared a good-natured laugh. Ash then faced Serena again, finding her much closer as her eyes fell to Ash's pocket, the invitation letter peeking out of it.

"So, you're taking part in the Iron League tournament." Serena's tone was curious, yet far calmer than before.

Ash smiled yet again, nodding. "I can't say no to a challenge, much less if I'm invited to take part."

"It's always good to see how enthusiastic you are about things." Serena smiled back, a hand over her ribbon.

Ash took a deep breath, glancing over to his Kalosian friends and even the Professor. "I look forward to see everything here in Ferrum. And meeting all of you again is great!"

He and Serena shared another smile together, and Ash was happy to say that the anxiety seemed completely gone for the moment. They *could* still be friends for the time being, and that was more than a little reassuring.

Ash could see Nia coming closer to the two, and worry washed over him as he expected her to say something she shouldn't have. Luckily for him, she simply chuckled out with interest.

"Well, since you all know each other, why don't we head to Neos City together?" She pointed behind her, further down the hallway. "The bus stop is just a little away, and it looks like you've got a lot to talk about."

Ash didn't need for her to repeat the question twice. "No problem for me! What about you all, guys?"

"I don't see why not," was Sycamore's swift reply. His old traveling companions and Miette didn't say anything, but their bright expressions were all the answer that was needed.

Ash only gave one last vibrant grin as Serena, Clemont and Bonnie all came closer to him, together once more. Ash grabbed the performer's hand tightly, embarrassment be damned as his enthusiasm peaked again, pointing onward with decision.

"Very well, then! Let's go to Neos City!" Ash yelled, bringing Serena and the rest of his friends along as Nia led the way towards the capital of the Ferrum region, where the Iron League tournament would finally begin.

A trio of conspicuously trenchcoated figures had their eyes on the merry gang of friends old and new as they left for the bus stop, spying on them from behind a column. Their focus was all on the cornerstone of the little group and his partner Pokémon, Ash Ketchum- or, as they always called him, the twerp- and the people closest to him, just the latest in a long list of wrenches in their plans.

"So, the newest twerps are all back together. Why I'm not surprised?" Jessie rolled her eyes, not even bothering to hide her annoyance.

Meowth just shrugged with nonchalance. "Da twoip is a friend magnet, ya should know that by now Jess."

The talking Pokémon's words weren't enough to quell Jessie's woes; if anything, that only made her snap harder as she put her foot down, squinting at the gathered twerps.

"Can't he just remain alone for more than half a day? That would make our job so much easier!" She shook her fist, face scrunched in almost comical anger. "This is the last time we follow him on another region, I swear!"

"Well, it wasn't a complete waste of time. That local girl said some interesting stuff." James' glance fell on Nia, his gloved hand stroking his chin with interest. "If Pokémon and battles are so different here in Ferrum, maybe it's worth looking more into them."

Their companion's words immediately caught Meowth and Jessie's attention, both staring at him with interest. James would've probably questioned them on what was wrong, but the fact they both flashed matching grins was enough to answer that.

"That's some good thinking!" Meowth held a paw high, his grin only growing more smug. "The Boss will reward us if we find good intel for Team Rocket!"

"And we'll catch Pikachu, too!" Jessie cackled to herself, a fanged smirk on her face as she stared back at their ever distant future prey. "I have a very, very good feeling out of this region!"

James seemed almost deflated at his friends' enthusiasm, simply sighing with a tired expression. "Usually, we feel that in every single region, Jessie..."

"That was in the past! The twerp definitely won't expect what we have in store for him this time!" Jessie waved him off, her previous anger replaced by copious amounts of determination.

Said determination quickly turned infectious, all members of the devious trio cackling at once not long after, almost ready to enjoy their future victory. After all, they were the Team Rocket trio, the best agents their organization had to offer!

Well, if one excluded their little failures here and there. Which happened maybe a bit too often. Probably more than they ever succeeded by now.

Meowth sighed to himself, losing just a bit of the choral enthusiasm. It was very hard to deny that their failed attempts to steal Pikachu or other Pokémon had reached the *quadruple* digits by now even with the occasional success and appropriation, but if there was something he, Jessie and James were good at was never giving up until the very end. They *would* succeed one day, they knew it - they just needed to put some work to ensure said success was permanent, that was all. Meowth tried hard to block the obvious addendum from his mind afterwards.

Fortunately, his train of potential self-loathing was quickly derailed by the arrival of someone else.

"Hey, did something happen here?"

The trio's happy cackling stopped right then as they turned around, eyes widened at the blue-clad teenager with short brown hair staring at them in confusion. Next to him stood a tall, bird-like Pokémon with pale cream feathers and what appeared to be a green hoodie of feathers over its head, wearing a similar expression as his trainer.

After several seconds of awkward silence, Jessie was the one to step forward with a nervous chuckle. "Uhm, not really. We're just... happy, is all."

The teen still seemed quite confused, until his eyes happened to fall on the departing group. His expression brightened considerably, snapping his finger.

"Oh, I get it. You saw him too, right? Ash Ketchum of Pallet Town." He grinned and pumped his fists as he turned back to the trio. "He's so cool, right?"

James blinked in confusion. "You know him?"

"Who doesn't?" The boy turned even giddier, arms outstretched at his sides. "He's a hero and a very famous trainer! I was curious to see who was going to be here for the tournament, but that's already a strong confirmation!"

He turned to Ash in the distance, his grin growing even larger. "Just imagine the level of battles he could bring here to Ferrum, the ingenious reversals of fortunes, the clever tactics no one would expect! He's a high caliber opponent, and one everyone will want to defeat to prove themselves."

His grin then turned into a rather cocky smirk, pointing skyward for dramatic emphasis, with his Pokémon did the same. "He's the perfect opponent to face on my path to glory! And no one will be able to ruin that! This is gonna be a match and a tournament for the ages, no matter what happens! And I'll make sure to come up victorious in

the best way possible! You heard that, Ferrum? I'll prove to be the best battle trainer this region can offer, and no obstacle you'll toss my way will stop me! That's my vow, as the future Grand Master of the Ferrum League!"

"Koroooo!" the Pokémon chirped in agreement with a toothy grin.

As the teen continued to boast about himself, the trio continued to stare at him utterly speechless. Given the newcomer seemed to have completely forgotten about their presence, the three criminals turned to each other, unsure of what to say to him or even his Pokémon.

James was the first one to speak, whispering to his partners. "I think we should leave this weirdo alone."

"Yeah, he's gonna make us look weird as well."

And so, without further ado, the Team Rocket agents put as much distance as they could between them and the weird kid, still boasting and declaring himself the future winner of the Iron League tournament among many other boasts. If nothing else, the guy sure didn't lack in self-esteem.

Meowth shook his head and focused on the path ahead as he, Jessie and James started to stalk for the twerp and his entourage once more. He tried to focus on their current mission, but as he tried to, something blocked him.

A strange anxiety started crawling on his back, his eyes gravitating towards the ground. He felt queasy, almost like something wasn't right on the land itself. A powerful, evil feeling, pulsing right under his feet.

It was something he never felt before, except maybe during that recent thing in Kalos with Team Flare. He wasn't quite sure what it was, but it sure didn't feel good.

The talking Pokémon quickly shook his head and put that worry to the side, trying to keep pace with his two partners. It was probably nothing anyway, and if anything came from it they would've dealt with it somehow. Hopefully.

And so, hoping to not to blast off too early this time, Team Rocket prepared themselves for the latest attempt of their thankless quest.

Welcome back to the second chapter of this story! I hope this continuation has been enjoyable so far, even if this was a chapter fairly low on action. I enjoyed quite a bit to write Ash's enthusiasm here, and I look forward to do more with him and the rest of the XY crew. The phone call Ash mentioned here happens to be the same one from my previous Amourshipping one-shot A Simple Call Between Friends, but reading it is not necessary to understand this story.

That one-shot, however, does inform the kind of take I'm going for Ash here: he's perfectly aware that Serena likes him now, but he's never seen her as more than a friend during their Kalos journey and thus is now trying to figure out how he truly feels. I do know however that Ash and romantic development are very tricky topics to handle, and I'm thus aiming for him to not treat Serena extremely differently from canon and to slowly and hopefully realistically grow in this area. Since I know that for some people Ash's technically official age is a hot button in regards to how this couple is portrayed, I can also confirm nothing extremely inappropriate will ever happen in this or future stories. I will also make sure the pairing doesn't drown out the story, and hope to achieve a satisfying balance along the way.

The bird Pokémon's cry (though I'm sure everyone figured out its species by now) is inspired by the same cry used by Epicocity in his Alola Trilogy, as I don't seem to recall an official dub cry for this specific Pokémon yet. I may update it in the

future to better reflect the official version, but for the moment, I'm keeping it as it is for convenience.

I give several thanks to Ander Arias, Epicocity, PraetorFable, AmourshippingCanon, potat lasaro, XDiamondX90 and ChE clarinetist for their support and kind reviews! I hope to have matched your expectations and that you can keep having fun with this story!

Next chapter will probably be published at the end of the week. Until then, thanks to everyone that will review, and I look forward to your thoughts! Have a nice time!

Welcome to Neos City

In the middle of a maze of purple and blue crystals protruding from all over, the young girl could do nothing but run as fast as she could. Her eyes went to and fro, in search of an escape route that wasn't there.

She sprinted forward, gasping for breath. The shards grew thicker and larger, the path itself shrinking around her. She tried to dent and destroy the stones on her path, only for them to prove sturdier.

The girl's heart was racing as her vision was surrounded by the sharp, huge crystals, any way out closed as soon as she saw it. She ran further ahead, her path growing smaller, trying to head for the only road left.

She didn't notice the sharp stones forming right on the road, her face meeting the ground. She gritted her teeth and tried to stand again, her gaze shifting back onward. She paled in horror.

The road was completely gone, with no way out. She was trapped, alone, and the crystals only grew closer with each passing second.

She tried to fight back tears as her whole body shivered, closing her eyes as she felt herself grow heavy and tired, every path away from her. It was the end, and she knew it.

At least, until she heard a known voice.

" You're safe now. Everything will be alright. "

A familiar warmth reach her, waves of power strong enough to blow wind all around erupting nearby. And then, cracking and shattering sounds boomed all around.

The girl opened her eyes, a kaleidoscope of exploding crystals filling her vision. Endless amounts of them were gone with each second,

restoring the path and making way for the beautiful land that was once there. She felt the heaviness lifted away, and the girl couldn't help but stare at the field of flowers.

And then, she smiled. She had no idea how, but the threat was gone. Everything was as right as it should've been.

Or so she thought. A dark, pulsing power that felt more wrong than any of the crystals ever did washed over her. The heaviness came back, stronger than it had ever been.

The girl turned around to her savior, and her scream pierced the sky.

"No!"

She sprung awake right at that moment, taking heavy breaths as her dream faded into reality and clarity. A severe headache also ensued, and as she rubbed her head the girl turned around to see where she was.

The area had been completely levelled into a small clearing, the trees uprooted and splintered around her and the grass completely obliterated. There were no wild Pokémon to be found around here, and the few she could spot in the distance seemed to be doing their best to stay away from where she stood. Knowing what happened, she really couldn't blame them.

The girl sighed, massaging her aching forehead. Yet again, she failed.

She looked down, clasping the little brooch around her neck as she observed it. Several minor cracks and imperfections dotted its corners, and they looked ready to expand at the slightest hurt. The girl held the brooch tight to her chest, remembering what it stood for.

Stopping that... *creature* was her duty. There was no way she could leave such power unchecked, not after everything that happened.

With that resolution in mind, the girl stood back up, her eyes back on the patches of ruined grass dotting the landscape. She then set up after the trail of destruction, ready to try again for as many times as necessary until that nightmare would be over.

The bus Serena and the others took from the airport to reach Neos City turned out to be far more crowded than they expected, with no seat left empty as several trainers shared one with their Pokémon. Many were staring at their own Poké Balls deep in thought, if they weren't just striking up friendly conversations with each other. The mood felt fairly upbeat as a result, with everyone's excitement palpable at a glance. Serena smiled before turning back to the seats around her, with the rest of their little entourage all waiting for the arrival one way or another.

As the Ferrum greenery and roads slipped by from the bus' windows, Ash and Pikachu continued to admire the scenery of their new adventure, their lust for adventure as obvious as ever. The Kantonian trainer's attention then moved to the several other people inside the bus, their grin only widening.

He held a familiar fire in his eyes as his attention turned to Nia next to him. "Are all these trainers coming for the Iron League ceremony, too?"

"Most likely." Nia smiled back as she rubbed her Weavile's head absentmindedly, her Pokémon eating through a bag of popcorn with a pleased grin. "The Iron League tournament is the most important event held here in Ferrum for battle trainers. Neos City will be even more packed than this bus."

"That's awesome! I can't wait to challenge them all!" Ash positively beamed, throwing his fist skyward as Pikachu emulated him.

Nia chuckled out, grabbing the boy's hand and pulling it down. "Easy, Ash. One can't just start a Ferrum battle wherever they want."

"What do you mean?" Ash blinked, head tilted.

The Ferric woman winked at him. "No reason to spoil the surprise. You'll know in due time."

Ash stared at her half-lidded, pouting. "Oh, come on."

Nia let out another brief laugh, and everyone else followed along. Even Ash joined in after a brief sigh.

"Your enthusiasm is always a joy to see," Clemont said, a smile on his face.

Bonnie nodded, showing off her biggest smile as she pumped her fists as well. "I can't wait to see Pikachu and the others defeat everyone!"

"Denene!" Dedenne chimed in, popping out from Bonnie's bag.

Seeing how fired up her youngest friend and Ash were, Serena let out a pleased giggle. Even after their brief time apart, it was nice to be together with her best friends once more. She owed a lot to them, and meeting up again made it seem like they never really went separate ways at all.

For his part, Ash chuckled too as he adjusted his hat, his attention going back to the two siblings and Serena as Pikachu hopped onto Ash's legs.

"We'll do our best, for sure." Ash hugged his first partner, and then turned towards all of his old friends and acquaintances. "So, how have things been?"

Professor Sycamore adjusted his posture, his arms crossed. "I've been continuing to work on my studies about Mega Evolution, trying to explore more of what it means and what truly triggers it. Alain and Mairin have been wonderful assistants for this."

"As for me, I've helped out with the last bit of reconstruction for Lumiose City, and the Gym had a steady influx of challengers. For the most part, things are back to normal." Clemont pushed his glasses up, turning away from others in mild embarrassment. "I wasn't expecting Professor Sycamore here to call for my help, but I thought it was fine to leave Clembot in charge. He's learned enough to be trusted, even if it'll never really be the same again."

His voice trailed off just a bit towards the end before he pursed his lips and said no more, and everyone bar Miette and Nia caught on why. Even if he repaired Clembot to the best of his skill, the fact that its old self couldn't be brought back still hung heavily over the inventor.

Ash lowered his hat, his expression growing guilty. "Sorry, I shouldn't have asked."

"No, it's okay. It's just how things are." Clemont sighed, his attention still on the window.

Thankfully, Bonnie was quick to take the lead and change the subject, inching closer to Ash. "So, what did you do? Did you have some cool fights?"

"Nah, the last few weeks have been mostly quiet. There were a few things, but I really just trained and prepared myself for my next challenges." Ash quickly regained his trademark smile and confidence. "And me, Pikachu and the others are ready to show the fruits of our hard work!"

"Pika pikachu!" Pikachu gave a challenging stare, sparking his cheeks.

Clemont too chuckled out. "Just as always, then."

Everyone else chuckled along with him, and as they all did, Serena looked back to Ash. His goals may have been rather simple, but he was always set on how to achieve them and ready to take on new

challenges. She always admired him for that, and seeing his drive brought even more pleasant memories of their journey together to mind, of all the Gym battles he faced and all the encouragement he gave her throughout her Performances.

As she walked down the memory lane, she almost missed the moment Ash faced her with interest. "What about you, Serena? Why are you here?"

Serena froze immediately, unsure of what to say. The answer was simple and clear, but knowing what it was only made her less willing to share it. Everyone else had been proactive and successful in some way or another, while the only reason she even came to Ferrum was because she was failing on her goal to use Pokémon Contests to improve as a Performer. She felt a knot in her throat, one that only started to loosen up thanks to a very helpful elbow on the side from Miette and a look that urged her to speak.

The honey-blonde's attention quickly shifted between her friend and Ash, whom was starting to look a bit puzzled. Serena gulped down her worries and put on an uneasy smile. "Well, I was considering to take part in the Ferrum League. Trying new things will probably help hone my performing skills."

She tried not to lose her smile, knowing she wasn't actually lying. But being aware of that only made her feel worse about what she didn't say.

Fortunately, Ash didn't press the question as he beamed to her. "That's great! Taking part in a tournament is always loads of fun, and you'll get to meet and learn from many new people!"

Serena pondered over Ash's words, her eyes moving downward. She stared at her hands and tightened them, her own gaze sharpening. He was right; even if she still wasn't too sure on what to do in that region, the idea of taking part in the Iron League did have a lot of merit, and still fit with her decision to expand her horizons. All

the doubts assailing her didn't have to shackle her down, and she never improved in the past by doubting herself.

Before she could reply to him, however, Nia chimed in with a grin. "Oh, looks like we're almost there. Welcome to Neos City, my friends."

At her words all the group turned around, towards the sprawling metropolis of tall skyscrapers opening ahead of them. Even from such a distance, it truly gave the impression of a modern and important city.

The Performer chanced a look at Ash, his grin growing slightly cockier and his stare fiercer. It was something she was more than familiar with: Ash knew a challenge was ahead, and he wouldn't back down from it.

Serena smiled once more, the same feeling coming back to her. And as the bus started the parking maneuvers, she could only think that she really wasn't to be outdone on that.

Slowly, the bus reached its parking point and slowed to a stop, its doors opening and allowing everyone to take their first steps in Ferrum's capital city. Everyone quickly rose from their seats and moved out, in a quick yet orderly fashion, and in less than one minute Serena and all of her friends joined the march through the road, taking in her surroundings along the way.

Neos City had a lot in common with Lumiose City, between the sprawling streets and the high number of people coming and going through their lives, but even at a distracted glance she was able to notice several differences: Lumiose was a city comparatively steeped in tradition, unafraid to show its history through its older buildings and city layout, while everything of Neos City screamed modernity. All the buildings and roads looked almost futuristic, with several more holographic billboards and state-of-the-art machinery dotting the cityscape than she was used to. She could also see far more people and Pokémon walking together, be it to work or to play,

and generally enjoying themselves more than she recalled to see through her Kalos journey.

In spite of being a big city, Serena could feel the warmth and life of its inhabitants quite clearly, the sense of community on display managing to make her smile briefly.

"Wow, this place is huge!" Bonnie ran ahead and twirled around with a big smile, as happy as she often was. A quick glance to Serena's side confirmed that Clemont was also looking around and adjusting his glasses with the goofiest grin on his face, no doubt looking forward to know more of his surroundings, with Ash sharing as much if not more interest. Even Miette and Professor Sycamore seemed to be curious.

Nia seemed to take that as her cue, smirking and stepping ahead alongside her Weavile, the Pokémon still munching on his junk food. She held a finger high, turning back to their little group.

"Neos City was the first settlement for trainers here in Ferrum, and to this day it's still one of the biggest cities of the region." The Ferric woman extended her arms, almost embracing the cityscape around her. "Our government, our tournaments, and most of our biggest workplaces are all located here. You really haven't visited Ferrum until you explore our capital."

Serena glanced back at Ash, his grin wider as he kept observing his surroundings with boundless curiosity. She giggled, already knowing that Ash's spirit of adventure was kicking into overdrive just from visiting the city. She turned around to take a good view of Neos City's locales herself, and she could notice Miette doing the same. They both knew that the region could've been a treasure trove of new opportunities, after all.

Nia seemed to notice their collective interest, but she quickly turned her attention to the road ahead, barely hiding a smile as she stopped.

"But enough of the tour guide stuff for now. We've got more important things to deal with first." She jabbed her finger forward. "Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the Battle Square!"

The little crew's attention shifted ahead, towards the crowded area ahead. It was built off the middle of a rather large section of the road, now cordoned for the incoming event, with a platform elevated right in the middle of it, ahead of the largest Pokémon Center Serena had ever seen. All around the patch of road were several trainers, accompanied by Pokémon both familiar and unknown, eagerly waiting for the incoming event. She could also swear to see a faint glowing circle surrounding the area, but she didn't dwell too much about it.

They all stepped forward, with Ash in particular putting in more steps than necessary, giddy with excitement as he looked at the gathered trainers and their battle-ready Pokémon.

Nia put her hands on her hips, while even Weavile put aside his bag of popcorn to emulate her. "It's a bit of an unofficial name for it, but this is the designated area for Ferrum battles here in the central part of Neos City."

"With that stage, I guess this is where the ceremony will take place?" Clemont asked, adjusting his glasses.

"Correct. It's an old tradition dating back to the first few Iron League tournaments, as a way to introduce all the future challengers in an informal way. We trainers all bond through battles on the road, after all, so why should our tournament be any different?"

Sycamore stroked his chin. "An uncommon train of thought, but an effective one."

"So many trainers and Pokémon..." Ash beamed, fists pumped as he and Pikachu turned back towards Nia. "Were they all invited from other regions like us?"

"Most, but not all. The Iron League tournament has just as many Ferric battle trainers taking part in it." The woman folded her arms, her attention drawn to a couple of trainers having a heated discussion not too far from them. "Each trainer brings with them part of their culture and flair for strategy. A melting pot of battle styles, all ready to prove their worth."

Ash's attention gravitated back towards the crowd, and if he wasn't pumped beforehand, he definitely was now. He trembled with energy, and then punched the sky vigorously. "I can't wait for this to start! I want to challenge everyone, right here and now!"

Serena and the others chuckled out while Ash continued to express his excitement. It was a familiar, almost expected sight, but that only made her feel more at ease. All her best friends were there, and with Miette and Professor Sycamore along, it really felt like she never left Kalos at all. They had all helped her in some way, and being together with them once more was a comforting thought.

"As eager as ever, aren't you, Ash?"

The familiar voice was enough to catch everyone but Miette's attention, with Ash and Pikachu in particular almost jumping on their feet. They all turned around, the familiar and dark-clad figure of Alain waving at them. He was walking right alongside his Charizard, the Pokémon wearing once more a familiar metal collar with his Mega Stone embedded. Mairin was also at their side, holding Chespie to her chest.

As expected, it was Ash who reacted first, coming closer to the duo and waving back at them. "Alain, Mairin! Great to see you again!"

The Kantonian trainer and his Pikachu wore a face-splitting grin, one that even Alain couldn't help but reply to with a smile of his own. The older trainer sized his rival up, gaze locked on him. "I expected you to be invited. No way a trainer like you would miss this."

"I'm easy to read." Ash gave a sheepish grin, one that quickly morphed into excitement and determination as he looked back at Alain, while Pikachu and Charizard did the same. Even at a distance, Serena could tell that the two trainers were saying more to each other with a few glances than they could with a thousand words.

As the two trainers continued their silent conversation, Mairin smiled and walked closer to Serena. "It's a pleasure to see you all again."

"The pleasure is all ours, Mairin." Serena smiled back, petting the Grass-type's head affectionately. "And hi to you too, Chespie."

Chespie smiled and let himself be petted. Right then, Serena heard the familiar sound of an opened Poké Ball, and she turned around to see another, familiar Chespin going from Clemont towards Chespie.

"Chespin ches!" Clemont's Chespin waved his arm with a smile, eagerly sprinting closer to his kin.

Chespie replied in kind, breaking out of Mairin's grasp and running towards the other Grass-type. "Pin pin!"

Both starters embraced, and not a moment sooner Chespin started to bawl of happiness right on Chespie's shoulder. Mairin's starter was only mildly surprised, patting his shoulder with a conflicted smile, much like he did the day they went their separate ways.

The girls got a good laugh out of it, as Chespin continued to cry his eyes out with joy. The two Pokémon only knew each other for the days they remained in Lumiose after the attack of Team Flare, but even in that short span Clemont's rascal Pokémon had grown attached to his counterpart. She couldn't help but giggle again, realizing just how much Chespin grew easily attached to others, just like her Pancham. And as she thought that, an idea crossed her mind.

She quickly pulled off her Poké Balls and tossed them in the air. "Guys, let's say hi!"

Braixen, Pancham and Sylveon all appeared in line, her one male Pokémon flipping his sunglasses up as he did so. Clemont smiled as well, grabbing his own set of Poké Balls.

"Good idea! Bunnelby, Luxray, come!" The other loyal Pokémon of the inventor all joined him, and it didn't take long for the old gang of Pokémon to get together and reunite, even in the absence of Ash's Kalos team beyond Pikachu.

Serena looked around as her and Clemont's teams said hi to each other and started chatting up, lingering briefly on Sylveon happily wrapping her feelers around Bunnelby's arm and then on Chespin leaving Chespie to get closer to Pancham. She chuckled as they quickly tried to hide their smiles to glare at each other, with Luxray and Braixen just sighing in the distance as a refreshing sense of familiarity filled the young performer.

Almost instinctively, Serena turned back to Ash. He was still deep in conversation with Alain, with Ash eagerly talking of some previous battles of his while Alain listened and offered his own thoughts. She didn't need to hear their conversation in detail to realize how the two trainers were on the same wavelength. She stepped a bit closer, and she could finally hear better their conversation.

"You're all as lively as ever," Alain said, hands digging inside his pockets.

"It's a good thing, isn't it?" Ash grinned. "You also look like you're having fun."

The teen blinked, almost taken aback. "Really?"

"You're smiling a bit more."

Alain didn't reply, just looking at Ash with surprise. He quickly smiled again however, a hand on his temple.

"I'll take it as a compliment." He chuckled a bit, and then his gaze became focused, staring right into Ash's eyes. "I hope you're ready for that rematch, however."

Ash snickered, holding a fist up. "Of course I am. And this time, I'll definitely win!"

"I hope you'll have time for me, too!"

Serena recognized the voice immediately, and Ash did too. They both faced to their left, where a familiar mop of green hair was rushing their way, waving with a bright grin on his face.

"Sawyer! Hi!" Ash said, sharing the same energy as he waved back. Alain turned as well, if with much less enthusiasm and recognition.

The Hoennian boy stopped just a few steps away from Ash, taking deep breaths as his smile grew even wider. He gave a long look to all the trainers surrounding them. "Seems like most of the participants of the Lumiose Conference have been invited, I'm pretty sure I saw Remo and Astrid around here."

"Well, it was the most recent big event for Pokémon trainers," Ash said, joining his rival in looking around. Serena wondered if he was recognizing some of his old opponents, or just itching to meet several new ones.

Alain folded his arms, moving closer to the other two. "So, this is going to be a repeat of it."

"Maybe, but I don't mind." Ash turned between Alain and Sawyer, sharing his grin with both. "It's going to be great, facing you two again."

Sawyer was just as enthusiastic, pumping his fists with the giddiest smile on his face. "Same here. I'll show you all the experience I've gathered so far!"

"And you'll see what me and Charizard are made of now," Alain added. As if to punctuate it, his Charizard blasted a Flamethrower in the air, trading gazes with Ash's Pikachu.

Ash stretched his fingers, replying in the only right way. "We'll do the same! Right, Pikachu?"

"Pika!" His partner sparked his cheeks, wearing his most challenging expression yet.

Serena allowed herself a brief chuckle as Ash and his two rivals from Kalos continued their discussion, quickly turning to see Clemont and Bonnie observing the trio with a knowing glance. They all sighed at once as Ash started to discuss of possible matches and catch up on what the other trainers did, just as expected. He wouldn't have been Ash without his enthusiasm for battles, after all.

But Serena was happy for him, knowing that he was spending time with friends that shared important moments of their previous journey with him. She felt almost envious: trainers had rivalries that pushed everyone to improve directly, while as a performer the majority of her rivals had only been indirect opponents, competing for the same goal but almost never one-on-one. Aria and Miette probably came the closest to one of Ash's rivals, and even then things weren't quite the same.

She glanced over at Miette, wondering what she was thinking, only to notice her looking intently at the side, far away from Ash and his rivals. Serena crooked an eyebrow.

"Huh, is something wrong?" she asked, walking closer to her fellow performer.

Miette squinted her eyes, stroking her chin in thought. "I could swear that woman looks familiar, but I can't quite piece why..."

Puzzled, Serena turned in the same direction, towards a rather busy and indistinct crowd of people. She wasn't quite sure who caught her

rival's attention, but as she saw a familiar, elegantly-dressed figure in purple standing with impatience, she finally understood everything, her face lighting up.

"That's Jessilie!" she said, something that only grew more certain as she spotted her familiar half mask and her inseparable Gourgeist at her side.

"Oh, right. That flamboyant performer that reached the Master Class finals with you and Shauna."

Serena couldn't help but notice the tinge of annoyance in Miette's voice, probably still bitter for how their last showdown turned out like. Still, the honey blonde didn't dwell on that, simply giving her friend a knowing glance. Miette ended up nodding, and the two performers went to greet their colleague.

"Jessilie, what a surprise. I didn't expect to see you in Ferrum!" Serena waved at the woman, spotting the blue-haired leader of her fan club right next to her and what looked to be a Weavile. The woman turned around instantly, twirling around like a trained dancer.

"Hah! You see, of course someone even in this new region would know of the beauty and grace of the one and only-" As her gaze finally met Serena's, the woman seemed to freeze in shock, an expression her Weavile and her fan shared. Jessilie shook her head quickly. "T-Twep-Serena, right? What an unexpected turn of events!"

The woman started to laugh to herself right after that with her Gourgeist following along, continuing way more than it should have. Serena could sense a slight nervousness, one shared by the blue-haired man and even the Weavile, and she tilted her head, unable to figure out why.

She quickly shook it and moved on, however, pulling off a smile. "It's great to see a familiar face around here. Are you going to take part in the tournament?"

"But of course! A star like me needs to shine brighter than any other, regardless of firmament! Battles, Contests, Showcases, no stage is small enough for someone like me!"

"Just as egomaniac as ever..." Miette rolled her eyes, very likely refraining from worse assumptions.

Serena didn't say anything, simply staring as Jessilie continued to strut and wildly gesticulate like the diva she was. Her personality and demeanor was the polar opposite of the kind of performer she wanted to be like, but the simple fact she was good enough to reach the Master Class' finals said everything about her skill. And now, a performer of her caliber was interested in giving a try to the Iron League Tournament, a battle competition.

Serena stepped closer, furrowing her brow, curiosity ticking in her brain. "Do you think this is going to be helpful to improve your routine? A way to become a better Performer?"

"No avenue to highlight my beauty and talent is pointless! It's all just a way for people to truly know I'm the best!" Jessilie said. Serena couldn't help but find it amusing.

Her enthusiasm wasn't dampened even as her fan tapped her shoulder with unease. "Uhm, Jessilie, we should probably get into a better position, it seems like the event is gonna start soon."

Serena noticed the Weavile gesturing at Jessilie wildly as well, and it was then that she could notice how... funny-looking the Pokémon was. Its frame was way too slim, its skin looked almost painted black rather than natural, and its collar and crown looked rather plastic for some reason. She eyed Nia's own Weavile from the distance for comparison, and the clear differences in appearance only made her even more puzzled.

Her attention swiftly went back to Jessilie, staring at her two worried companions alongside Gourggeist. She seemed slightly annoyed by the interruption, but that lasted only enough for a headshake.

"Very well, then." She gave one of her trademark smug grins, turned around and strutted through the crowd. "Fame and glory, here I come!"

She continued her march with the rest of her entourage, laughing all the while. Serena and Miette could only look after her, neither saying a word until Jessilie was distant enough. Only then did Miette take a long sigh. "I don't get how she even reached the finals with that attitude..."

Serena didn't answer, instead thinking back to Jessilie and Miette's own words. Among her rivals, she was probably the one she knew the least, only having interacted with her a few times. To reach the Master Class and end up as one of her final opponents alongside Shauna, she really had to know her stuff in terms of Pokémon Showcases and how to improve her craft.

Her attention went back to the woman, pacing around with the confidence of a true diva. She wanted to shine brighter than any other star, something that sounded at once selfish and admirable. But most of all, that desire reminded her of the most important piece of advice she ever received in her career as a trainer.

Nothing we do is pointless.

Serena scrunched her blue ribbon instinctively, thinking back of that time at the Summer Camp. Ash's words were what gave her the push to become a Performer, and to persevere in spite of any roadblock on her path. They were a constant reminder to keep going forward, and that there was no reason to worry for the future.

The honey blonde shook her head, laughing at herself. How could she forget such an important lesson? No matter her current Contest woes, if one of her rivals decided Ferrum battles could help and Aria decided to visit the region, then the Iron League Tournament definitely sounded like something worth taking part in.

She smiled again, brighter than she did since she arrived in Ferrum. She wouldn't be scared to take a step forward, not anymore.

Her train of thoughts was derailed quickly after, as Bonnie called from the distance. "Serena, Miette, come here! They're about to begin!"

Serena heeded the call, noticing how the people around her were coalescing into a more compact crowd than before as several people made their way to the platform ahead. She traded a glance with Miette, and both Performers went back to rejoin their friends, ready to know all the details of the incoming tournament.

Everyone's attention was on the platform right in the middle of the square, and the building anticipation only increased further as several people started to make their way over it. Among them, Serena could clearly recognize the Champions Steven and Diantha alongside the Top Coordinator Wallace, with each of their appearances bringing with them a roar of applause and cheers. They were hardly the only people present, and by the look in Ash's and everyone else's eyes and the constant droning chatter, all of them were people of notable stance in some area of Pokémon training.

Of course, Serena herself realized it as Aria stepped up on the platform, exuding the same grace and elegance she always did as she waved the crowd. As the people around her went wild and chanted Aria's name, the performer's eyes locked onto the Kalos Queen, the girl she considered her goal, knowing full well that Miette was doing the same. Even so long after the Master Class and in a completely different region, Aria was still able to capture the hearts of her audience.

The attention Aria was getting only stopped as a brunette woman reached the platform with a rather lanky-looking Pikachu in tow, eliciting a roar louder than any of the previous ones and a cascade of clappings. Serena recognized the woman and her attire from several of the screens and billboards scattered through the airport

and Neos City, a dead giveaway of her importance. She gave a quick look around before she grabbed a microphone, clearing her throat and smiling at the crowd.

"Trainers from Ferrum and other, faraway lands, I welcome you to the Battle Square of Neos City. I'm Alyssa, Grand Master of the Ferrum League, and I'm grateful to see so many of you gathered here for this year's Iron League tournament." The woman smiled, while her Pikachu folded his arms in the cutest attempt to look cool. "From the esteemed guests that came from other regions to trainers of every skill level, I hope the tournament will be reason for fun and excitement!"

The excitement of the crowd only grew louder. The performer chanced a look at Ash, and as expected, he was completely enraptured by what Alyssa was saying. She gave a brief chuckle before her attention went back to the Grand Master, the woman now pacing through the stage with her hand held high.

"For a long time here in this region, Ferrum battles have been a way for humans and Pokémon to bond together and grow closer to each other, acting in sync and learning from one another in perfect synergy. We have always strived to improve and be the best versions of ourselves, and ultimately, this is the goal of this tournament.

"We wanted to offer a kind of experience unlike any of the official competitions around the world, one that Trainers, Coordinators, Performers and any other declination of Pokémon Trainers could enjoy as a way to improve their craft. It's as part of this mission statement that we invited representants from all over the Pokémon training world to stand together here, today. If you would allow it, I'd like for each of them to speak their minds on the upcoming tournament."

Alyssa stopped mid-stage, turning towards her guests and offering the microphone. After a quick glance between them, Aria was the first to step forward, gently picking the microphone and walking

forward. Serena frowned, staring at her goal and rival. The current Kalos Queen was smiling and waving at the crowd as they showered her with an applause, with all the same grace she always held. Even after reaching her in the Master Class, Serena never felt more distant from her.

"Hello, fellow trainers. I'm Aria, a Pokémon performer and current Kalos Queen. My profession doesn't require battling with my Pokémon on a regular basis, but I couldn't decline Miss Alyssa's request for my presence." She gave a good-natured giggle and placed a hand over her heart. "Even from my position, however, I would say exploring new avenues to connect with one's Pokémon is a step every trainer should take, trying to improve themselves in areas they may lack. Complacency often leads to stagnation, and exploring the road less taken may be exactly what one needs to reach the path they aim for."

Aria's statement was replied to with the loudest shower of clappings yet, with the girl replying with a curtsy and an elegant wave to the crowd as she looked over all of the crowd. Serena almost froze as Aria's gaze met hers, but only a moment later Serena felt excitement surging from her, giving the Kalos Queen her most determined look. And for just a second, Aria seemed to reply in kind with a happier smile before her attention turned back to the other people in the square. Serena placed a hand over her ribbon, scrunching it as she lost herself in thought.

Aria passed the microphone to Diantha, with the Kalos Champion stepping forward to talk of her stance on the forthcoming event. It was definitely interesting and the crowd was enraptured, but Serena's mind was elsewhere as the actress and the other personalities continued to speak from the stage, all with similar praises for the Ferric tournament. Her attention was still on Aria and what she said, of the road less taken and to reach one's path. The honey-blond Performer almost laughed at how fitting those words were for her predicament.

She continued to think about it, and not much later the microphone finally returned in Alyssa's hands. The Grand Master and her Pikachu returned to the center of the platform, beaming back at the gathered trainers.

"I thank all of my esteemed colleagues for their kind words. It's a honor and a pleasure to share the spotlight with them all. I'd love to talk more with them, but I'm sure you are all curious to know what the Iron League tournament will entail. And so, without further ado, let's proceed."

Alyssa snapped her fingers, and several holographic screens materialized around her. Each one of them showed a specific locale, from harsh mountains to abandoned manors to grassy plains and everything in between, alongside larger maps and several stadiums and areas showcasing Pokémon battles. A fancy logo featuring a crest with a diamond symbol was embedded on every screen, probably symbolizing the Ferrum League, while several names and descriptions cycled through every projection. Alyssa turned her attention to one specific screen, showcasing a rather heated battle between an Aegislash and a Lucario, and pointed that way.

"The typical battle style employed here in Ferrum is known as 'Ferrum battles'. It's a best two out of three rounds format in specific, recognized arenas all around the region. Each battle will be fought under a time limit, and whichever Pokémon defeats the opponent or inflicts the most damage will be declared the winner of the round, with official judges deciding how to proceed in the event of a tie. Aside from that, any trainer will only be allowed the use of one partner per Ferrum battle, but even then, your partners won't fight alone."

On the same screen, just as the Aegislash was gaining the upper hand and slicing through the defenseless Lucario, a Lapras surfed in from the side to stop the blade's path, slamming on it. The Water-type retreated soon afterwards and the Lucario rushed towards Aegislash instead, only for an Emolga to fly in and paralyze it as

Aegislash recovered. As the battle continued, Alyssa pointed at the screen before speaking again.

"These you're seeing are known as Assist Pokémon, a role you'll be allowed to set up for two of your friends for each Ferrum battle. For every round, you'll be allowed to choose one Assist Pokémon to help you out, and they'll be allowed to join the fold for a maximum of ten seconds per round to help out your main battler. A simple but well-planned usage of this mechanic is all an expert trainer needs to completely turn the tables on their opponents!"

While a part of the audience just continued to cheer, a rather heavy chatter started just as soon, with reactions ranging from skepticism to excitement. At a glance, Serena noticed several people, likely Ferrics, react to the reveal with a mixture of expectations and pride, while others seemed to wonder how that mechanic could be used well and which kind of combination moves they could lead to. She couldn't deny to be very curious herself, as her attention returned to Alyssa once more. The woman grinned, likely expecting the reaction.

"There are some other quirks, but I'll let your future battles surprise you with them. Beyond the aim to make trainers and Pokémon grow closer together, we also want to give a fighting chance to all trainers to fight on even ground regardless of origin, and to give a reason for people to explore the Ferrum region and all it has to offer. As such, this is the solution that we came up with."

All the screens refreshed at another snap of the Grand Master's fingers, all the views and battles replaced with a series of diagrams and lists with several pictures and names all over it, constantly shuffling and getting updated at a moment notice. Serena and the others observed them carefully as Alyssa continued her explanation, moving around the stage to highlight each screen.

"Here in the Ferrum region we keep an official, constantly updated ranking of the top trainers of the region as a way to push every battle trainer to improve, with only the absolute best trainers being allowed to face the League Masters and the Grand Master for their titles.

Said ranking takes into account tournament participation, individual battles, and several other elements to gain an as ideal as possible insight of their skill level compared to the rest of the region. The Iron League tournament, as such, will follow a simplified version of this same system.

"To ensure fairness whether the trainers are Ferric natives or foreigners, every single contestant will start from zero points and will have to work their way up to ten thousand. There will be several ways to gain points, the first and most important of which will be taking part in specific tournaments that will be held all throughout Ferrum for the next few weeks. Each of them will be designed around custom rules to let people experience every side of Ferrum battles, and every participant will be awarded points, with the first place winner gaining the highest amount.

"Beyond the tournaments, there will be special events that will allow people to face a League Master, known as League Certification Exams, mirroring the official battle format against them. In this case, the points won't be awarded in a fixed amount, but rather based on your performance in battle and the skills demonstrated. As such, you will be awarded points even in case you won't defeat any of the League Masters, with a far higher amount of points given to anyone who will win against them.

"Lastly, and most importantly, battle trainers will be allowed to face each other in official battles, with the winner claiming half of the points of the defeated. Unfinished battles and the ones fought outside of Ferrum battle rules won't be counted for this rule, nor will ties. The limitations put on this method were chosen to promote travelling over the region rather than just staying in one location to try and gather all the possible points from the same people. This is a tournament to help people expand their horizons, after all.

"Once sixteen battle trainers will gain the required ten thousand points, the selection period will end and everyone will be tasked to come back here in Neos City for the Tournament of Victory, which will crown the winner of the Iron League tournament."

Alyssa smiled as her explanation ended, turning back towards the crowd and stepping forward. Her whole body language seemed to shift as she gave a challenging look to the gathered trainers, pointing a finger towards them all.

"You will all have to prove the masters of your craft if you hope to claim a spot in the Tournament of Victory. Are you ready to prove your worth, with wills as strong as unbending steel?"

From the crowd rose the loudest and most passionate cry of agreement. The Grand Master grinned once more as the challenge was accepted, her Pikachu sparking with intensity alongside her.

"Exactly what I wanted to hear!" Alyssa turned around, glancing over to the nearby red-roofed building with a familiar Poké Ball logo. "You will be able to officially sign up for the tournament in the Pokémon Center, and then you will be free to search in any angle of the Ferrum region at your discretion. I wish you all good luck, and for you to prove to the world what you're made of!"

And with a quick bow to the crowd, Alyssa and all of her guests moved out of the stage, yet again followed by cheers from the enthusiastic trainers as the event officially closed. As it did, Serena couldn't help but look after the Grand Master of the Ferrum League as she parted the crowd around her and moved elsewhere, saluting the crowd and moving gracefully around the future competitors.

The way she managed to govern the excitement and make everyone look forward to the upcoming tournament was unlike anything she had ever seen in her career. She knew what everyone's passions were built on, and used that to bring several different people together towards the same goal, unified in purpose. A tournament involving people from so many different professions didn't feel anything like an actual Pokémon League or the Master Class, but she couldn't say that was a bad thing as she saw everyone chatting up and discussing the announcement.

"Looks like an interesting tournament, don't you think?" Miette asked, stepping right next to her.

Serena nodded, her eyes still moving to her surroundings as the crowd started to disperse around her, unable to find Jessilie or her fanclub anywhere else. Her attention turned then towards her old companions, and she and Miette quickly reunited back with Ash and the others, deep in conversation as expected.

"So this is what the Iron League tournament is all about." Ash adjusted his cap, flashing a grin to the sky. "Man, it's even better than I expected!"

"A battle format both familiar and different... this is gonna be the source of so much valuable experience!" Sawyer said, fists pumped as he observed the trainers slowly moving towards the Pokémon Center, excitement sparkling in his eyes.

Bonnie shared the same excitement as the older trainers, a huge grin flashing on her face as she tossed her arms up. "I want to see all the cool battles now! This will be fun!"

"Dene dene!"

Serena and the others chuckled out, the atmosphere lightening up significantly ahead of all that anticipation and excitement. On the side, Sycamore observed all the other trainers leaving, slowly emptying the Battle Square, stroking his chin with interest. "A tournament that allows everyone to grow together regardless of their calling sounds like a marvelous idea indeed. I can't help but be curious of what the Grand Master didn't explain."

"I can imagine you would. After all, you're the authority on Mega Evolution from the Kalos region, right?" Nia asked, arms crossed with a smile.

Sycamore smirked, rubbing the back of his head. "So you noticed."

"I keep up with foreign information, just thought it wasn't the time to bring it up early."

As Sycamore and Nia started to get deep in conversation, Serena's attention moved away from the adults and back on her friends, and Ash in particular, all brimming with anticipation and excitement.

"I can't wait! A whole new place to explore, so many new people to meet and battle! This tournament is going to be the best!" Ash declared, fists pumped as his grin only widened.

Alain let out a smile of his own for the briefest of moments. "Your enthusiasm is always a welcome sight."

"I'm happy to know you and Sawyer will take part, too." Ash's attention shifted back to the inventor at his side, slinging his arm across his shoulder. "What about you, Clemont?"

Clemont seemed taken aback by the request, his body stiffening as he looked over at Ash with surprise. He quickly gave his friend a sheepish grin however, rubbing his neck uneasily. "I'd love to, but I really have to help Professor Sycamore with his research here in Ferrum. Me and Bonnie will have to sit this one out."

"Oh, come on, Clemont! You know I'm a big girl!" Bonnie complained, hands on her hips as she glared over at her brother. From her bag, Dedenne seemed to emulate his caretaker.

Clemont sighed, pushing his glasses up. "I know, I know, but we're gonna return to Kalos once we're done here. It's not like last time, where we only separated for a while."

Bonnie seemed about to complain at her brother, but she quickly sighed instead, her face turning brighter from a smile.

"That just means I'll have to cheer even harder! I know Ash can defeat anyone!" She punched the sky with confidence, giving Ash an encouraging wink.

Ash chuckled out. "Thanks, Bonnie."

The boy then turned back to Serena, giving her an inquisitive look. "What about you, Serena? You said you wanted to take part, right?"

She was slightly surprised to hear him bring that back up, unsure of what to say as her body stiffened. She turned to Miette for support, only seeing her grinning and holding a thumbs up. One annoyed glare later, Serena gulped and scrunched up her blue ribbon, turning back to Ash. She was still considering the idea inside her, but she decided to take a deep breath and reveal it to him. She stepped closer, ready to reply, only for her to not get the chance.

"Woah, woah, woah, hold it right there!"

Everyone stopped, turning to their side to spot an unfamiliar face staring back at them. It was a boy roughly about Ash's age, with short brown hair and wearing a blue sweater, and wearing the same kind of earpiece Nia and other Ferric people wore- a 'Battle AR', if she recalled the advertisements well. His jaw hung open and his eyes were wide, almost as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing. Right next to him a human-sized, bird-like Pokémon that seemed to wear a cloak of leaves stood, wearing the exact same expression.

Before Serena or the others could talk, the boy pulled off a very bright smile, pointing at the trio of Pokémon trainers among them, the Pokémon emulating him. "Yes, it's you! Alain, Ash, Sawyer! I can't believe it!"

"Huh?" Ash and his two Kalosian rivals looked back at him, the Kantonian boy tilting his head quizzically. The newcomer jumped up his fists as he continued to admire them starry-eyed, his grin in danger of splitting his face.

Ash scratched his head, uncertain. "Do we know you?"

"Nope, but I sure know you three! The biggest competitors of the Lumiose Conference, the three aces of Kalos! Your performance at

the League was amazing!" The boy turned to his backpack, pulling off pen and a notebook and shoving them on the trio's faces. "Can I have your autographs? Please, it would mean a lot to me!"

Ash and Sawyer were taken aback by the request, just looking over at the boy in disbelief. Alain, for his part, just blinked in confusion. It took a few moments for Ash to inch closer, grabbing the boy's pen.

"Uhm, sure..." Ash returned to smile, tapping the pen on the notebook's paper on a blank page. "Your name is...?"

The boy pointed to himself, grinning. "Farran! The future Grand Master of the Ferrum League!"

He laughed at his own declaration, and fistbumped his bird Pokémon, his eyes burning with an ambition that Serena couldn't help but find familiar. Ash seemed to do the same, smiling just as much as he placed his signature and stepped back to allow Sawyer to add his own.

"That's the spirit!" Ash told him, his attention quickly moving to the joyful bird Pokémon right next to Farran. "Is that Pokémon yours?"

"Yep! He's my friend and battle partner!"

As if on cue, the Pokémon struck an elegant pose, opening both of his feathered arms and showing off his lithe, agile body for everyone to see, twirling on himself and then striking an action pose. He seemed proud to have attracted everyone's attention as Alain moved to add his own sign, clearly embarrassed and seemingly unsure of how to write it.

Ash was quick to the draw, whipping out his Pokédex and pointing it to Farran's partner. " *No Data*, " the device blurted not a second later.

The boy from Pallet Town quirked an eyebrow, his attention enraptured back by the showy bird Pokémon as he now dusted off his feathers. He then eyed the Pokédex, shaking it lightly.

"What's up?" Sawyer asked, head tilted.

"Looks like your Pokédex needs an update." Sycamore stroked his chin, before he turned towards Farran's friend as well. "That's a Decidueye, the final evolution of the Alola region's Grass-type starter, Rowlet. A Grass and Ghost-type Pokémon."

Ash didn't say anything, but nodded as he absorbed the information, probably wondering what 'Alola' and 'Rowlet' were. For his part, Farran nodded vigorously. "Exactly! They aren't the most common Pokémon in Ferrum, but that only makes my buddy here all the more special!"

"Korrrooo!"

The boy and Decidueye quickly shared a look, before fist bumping and slinging an arm over each other's shoulders, ending their little charade with a twin victory sign and the smuggest grin Serena ever saw. She really didn't know what to say at him, the energy these two shared reminding her of Jimmy and his rocker Pikachu back in Kalos.

As no one else commented on their little number, it fell on Nia to break the ice once again, observing the newcomer with interest as she approached with her Weavile. "That's the kind of enthusiasm we need! Are you taking part in the Iron League tournament too?"

"Of course! I'm still very much green, but this is the beginning of my very own legend! Soon, everyone will know of Farran's skills as a battle trainer, and I will defeat even the Grand Master Alyssa herself!"

Bonnie blinked quite a few times, before she shrugged and shook her head. "He sure doesn't lack energy..."

Her comment went unnoticed however, as Alain finally finished his sign and handed the notebook back to Farran. Serena could spot Sawyer's neat handwriting and Ash's hurried one right beside Alain's

way too stiff and regular one, among countless other names. Farran hugged the notebook instantly, grinning like a fool. He then faced the trainers once more, bowing heavily in their direction.

"Thank you for taking the time to do this! This is going to be the building block of my future greatness! The torch being passed from one generation to the next!" The boy held the notebook high, with Decidueye fancying himself a herald for the item's greatness as he pointed its way with both feathered arms.

"It's okay, really, you don't have to be like this..." Sawyer held up both arms, sweat forming on his uneasy face. Serena could definitely understand why. Ash, for his part, just laughed off at the Ferric boy's excitement.

Serena did too, and it was at that point that she finally noticed how Decidueye was staring intently at Pikachu, enough to catch Ash's partner's own attention. The bird quickly elbowed his trainer on the side, catching the exuberant trainer's attention. The Grass-type whispered something to Farran, and the trainer crossed his arms while pondering over his seeming words.

"Hmmm... I see what you mean... well..." Farran nodded to himself, surprised and excited in equal measure. He then went over to Ash, rubbing his neck. "Uhm, there was something I wanted to ask, if it's okay."

Ash nodded. "Sure, what is it?"

Farran took a moment to reply, gulping down in embarrassment. He seemed like a completely different person than few seconds before, even avoiding eye contact with Ash. Yet, Serena could see the boy's body twitch in anticipation. Finally, he mustered the courage to smile at the black-haired trainer.

"Well... my Decidueye would like to face your Pikachu." He pumped his fists, stepping forward. "We've seen a lot of your matches, you

know, so we want to witness first-hand the power of your starter Pokémon.

"Can we have a Ferrum battle, right here and now?"

Ash seemed just about to accept, only for Clemont to step between the two, an eye back to the nearby Pokémon Center. "Isn't this time to sign up?"

"There's nothing to worry about, the registrations won't end for a while." Nia folded her arms, appearing rather relaxed. "And if a Ferrum battle is what Farran wants, this is the perfect moment to have it. Neos City's battle arena is empty now."

She tilted her head to her side with a rousing gaze to challenge Alyssa's. "What do you want to do, Ash?"

As Serena turned towards Ash, she wasn't surprised at all in seeing his eyes burning with a familiar fire; the determination born of meeting a kindred spirit, a connection that can only be forged between trainers on the battlefield. The very same fire he had when he found Alain and Sawyer again.

Ash pumped his fists as well, matching Farran's grin. "Sure, let's do it. I wanted to try a Ferrum battle as well!"

"Pikapika!" Pikachu raised his tiny fist as well, locking onto Decidueye. Farran's partner replied in kind.

As for Farran himself, his smirk turned into the most beaming smile yet. "That's awesome! Thank you! This means a lot for us!"

"You're welcome. But don't expect me to hold back." Ash smiled, exuding as much confidence as Farran did, if not as loudly.

Farran laughed, his gaze only growing more challenging. "I wouldn't ask for anything less!"

"You're both getting fired up, I like it! This is the kind of enthusiasm we love here in Ferrum." Nia turned around, gesturing at everyone to follow her. "Come along, the battle arena is just ahead."

With those words, Nia started to lead the way, with everyone else following after her. All the while, Ash, Farran and their Pokémon continued to trade challenging grins, both ready for the match that was about to ensue. Serena smiled at the familiar sight; no matter how the battle would go, that really seemed to be the start of something great.

And so they walked along, curious to see how the incoming battle would turn out.

Hello again to everyone here, with the third chapter of Ash and the others' journey through the Ferrum region! This was a particularly tricky chapter to write, as it had to introduce both the general idea of how Ferrum battles will go like (and make them remarkably distinct from your average battle style), and to reintroduce the majority of the cast of this series, which I hope to have done well. I did originally toy with the idea of having older faces like May and Dawn pop up and maybe some prior rivals, but trying to do so in planning only ended with a lot of story bloat that I thought was better cut and didn't enhance the story as much as I'd liked. Chapter 4 was also originally part of this chapter, but I divided it after being told of just how long a read it ended up being. Hopefully, it was still satisfying enough to read.

I tried to replicate as much of Ferrum's game battle system in this, with obvious concessions made on how the Assist Pokémon work and especially the League Qualification Exams, which in-game are the battles you can take to move on a superior rank until you reach the Iron League but that I reframed as just special battles for points as I'm using the Iron League as a region-wide tournament for better story pacing. Hopefully, I made a good call in this sense.

Farran here is based, aesthetically-speaking, on the default male protagonist's design from Pokkén Tournament, and his name comes from the french word for 'Iron'. I'm having a lot of fun writing him and Decidueye, and I hope to not make him annoying even if I know characters like him can easily cross the line unfortunately.

The idea of Jessilie as a sort of pseudo-rival is not exactly all thanks to me, but I was heavily inspired by the progression Epicocity gave to Jessie during a significant portion of his Ancienverse saga, and thought it was a good dynamic to make use of to bring Serena's story forward. I thank him for both the inspiration and the help with the story so far.

Many thanks to Rajiv A. Rajaram, Ander Arias, Epicocity, Marcellasnow231, ChE clarinetist, Captainsquid12, Allison Illuminated and Arc-Shipping99. I'm happy to know this story has been approved to the Quality Controlled Amour Community, and I hope the rest of the story will continue to match and hopefully surpass everyone's expectations.

Thanks to everyone that read this story, hope you enjoyed this chapter and I look forward to your thoughts! See you in the next chapter!

A Boy Named Farran

As a small suggestion for the readers who like to associate specific soundtracks to moments of a story, I highly recommend the 'Turnover (Gunvolt)' track from Azure Striker Gunvolt 2 for the battle ahead. It's a song that I like to consider Farran's unofficial battle theme.

In any case, hope you'll enjoy this chapter!

It didn't take long for Ash and the others to reach the battle arena. With the stage retracted underneath the ground, Nia led them exactly in the center of the Battle Square, inside the faint glowing circle Serena had previously noticed. Neither Ash nor Farran wasted any time in placing their partners ahead of each other, grinning at once as Pikachu and Decidueye stretched themselves in preparation. At the edge of the circle, Serena and the others stood with bated breath, with Sawyer in particular keeping his pen ready to scribble on his notebook.

"This is going to be interesting. I wonder if Ash planned new strategies since the Kalos League," the Hoennian trainer said, making a rough sketch of Farran's partner with several observations attached.

Serena didn't respond, her eyes fixated on Ash, wondering what kind of plan he would go for, and how this Ferrum battle would end up being different from normal ones. Then, she felt a hit at her side, and turned to see Miette giving her a playful smirk.

She elbowed her a couple times more, her smirk only widening. "So, happy to see your Ash kick a newbie's butt?"

"It's just a normal battle, Miette!" Serena glared at her, flustered and failing to hide a blush.

That only made Miette laugh as she inched closer, an exaggerated evil look on her face. "But you seem so very interested..."

Serena rolled her eyes, knowing exactly that the best course of action was to let her go. Sometimes, she wondered what she found so fun about riling her up. Her attention quickly went back to Ash, just as Nia took her place at the center of the field. Next to her was her Weavile, now chomping over a croissant.

"Alright, I shall be the referee for the battle. It will be a best two out of three match, with each round lasting five minutes at most. Do you want me to explain the rules, Ash?" Nia asked, almost daring Ash with her eyes.

He nodded and adjusted his hat. "No need to! I'll see as we go!"

"I knew you would say that." Farran snickered, amused yet not condescending as he gave Ash a smile. "You just go with the flow, right?"

"We try! And together, me and Pikachu will always find a way to come up ontop!" Ash declared. Pikachu agreed, flexing his little muscles.

Farran and Decidueye grinned and pointed at themselves. "Good, because that's how me and Decidueye roll, too!"

Both sets of trainers and Pokémon exuded confidence, waiting for their moment to clash.

Just then, Nia raised both arms, ready to begin. "Round one, fight!"

The circle expanded into a transparent orange dome, encasing both fighters and trainers. Right above them, a giant panel appeared in mid-air, displaying a three-hundred number and instantly counting down. Both Pikachu and Decidueye rushed at each other.

"Pikachu, let's start! Thunderbolt!" Ash jabbed ahead, as Pikachu's cheeks sparked brightly.

"Chuuu!" A searing bolt flew onward, charring the ground on its wake. Decidueye twirled away, barely missing the bolts of electricity.

Farran snapped his fingers. "Spirit Shackle!"

With a fluid and quick movement, Decidueye spread a wing like a bow and drew a string close. Several shadowy arrows formed in the middle, and he fired a salvo of ghostly ammo towards Pikachu. The Electric-type deftly dodged it all by rolling away, each arrow planting itself on the concrete.

Ash seemed relieved, and punched ahead. "Go for Iron Tail!"

Pikachu's tail shimmered white as he somersaulted towards Decidueye, only to freeze in mid-air and slam down like a rock, right next of the feathers. Decidueye grinned, while Pikachu slowly pulled himself up.

Ash's eyes widened. "Pikachu, are you okay?"

Pikachu attempted to stand again, and with a bit of trouble he managed to. He charged a Quick Attack and prepared to run, only to fall back on his feet again, as if yanked to the ground. Ash was even more puzzled; Serena blinked, trying to understand what was going on, until her eyes fell to one of the arrows. Or rather, the visible shadow thread connecting it to Pikachu's own shadow.

Ash seemed to realize it too, frowning. "What the-"

"Nice, don't you think? Spirit Shackle is a Ghost-type move that can bind you in place by striking your shadow! Ideal against speedy types like you!" Farran smirked, almost gloating at the explanation. Then, he snapped his fingers with gusto. "Decidueye, run over and slap some sense into Pikachu!"

Decidueye did as requested, hovering towards Pikachu and slapping him away with his wing, strong enough to blast him upwards until the Spirit Shackle yanked Pikachu groundward once more. Farran's partner extended his drawstring again, firing another Spirit Shackle towards the falling Electric-type.

Ash clenched his fists, trying to stay calm. "Pikachu, Iron Tail!"

"Chu-Pika!" Pikachu righted himself just enough, tail shining brightly as he slapped the projectile away, the feather arrow slicing the wind back towards Decidueye.

"Fly up and fire a barrage!" Decidueye spread his wings and flew high, the Spirit Shackle narrowly missing him as he reached a vantage point over Pikachu. He pulled the drawstring close again, more than fifteen feather arrows spreading along the makeshift bow. They all aimed towards the defenseless Pikachu, just as Decidueye readied several more for another blow.

With Pikachu still falling groundward, his movements still chained by the original Spirit Shackle and targeted by a rain of arrows too thick to deflect, Ash's next order was quick.

"Blast them away with a Thunderbolt!" Ash punched upwards. Pikachu grinned, sparking his cheeks as he got ready to land.

"Chuuuuuu!" The moment the Electric-type touched down, he blasted up his electricity towards the incoming sea of arrows. The electric power was strong, annihilating the ghostly one and letting all the feathers rain harmlessly around Pikachu, their threat gone as the Thunderbolt continued to travel towards Decidueye.

Yet Farran smirked, snapping his fingers again. "Exactly what I wanted you to do! Razor Leaf!"

Decidueye let out a fearless cry, spinning around himself as a storm of sharp leaves surrounded him, tunnelling the area just as the Thunderbolt came closer. Decidueye started heading groundward

himself, aiming for Pikachu, just as the electric blast was dispersed and negated by the centrifugal force. Decidueye kept spinning, aiming for Pikachu like a living drill, the Razor Leaf tornado only growing thicker.

And then, Ash's eyes widened. "Wait, that's-"

"What can I say? I learned from the best!" Farran declared, a beaming smile as he gave Ash a thumbs up.

Ash didn't seem too pleased by the comment, he and Pikachu keeping their eyes on the drilling Decidueye. The sheer change confused Serena, a sense of worry enveloping her.

"What's that thing?" she asked, turning around to the others and hoping for someone to know. None seemed to, everyone just looking as confused as she was.

It was Sawyer that stepped in, a concerned look on his face. "I've seen it in some videos of Ash's old battles... that's Counter Shield, a strategy he developed back in Sinnoh."

Everyone else reacted in just surprise, but for Serena, a sense of dread settled in as she turned back to Ash's battle, Decidueye still drilling down towards the chained Pikachu. There was little to nothing Ash could do, and-

Serena shook her head, banishing her thoughts away. If Counter-Shield truly was an Ash strategy, then he probably knew it more than anyone else. If anyone could find a way to turn things around on Farran, then it had to be Ash. She had to trust him.

And, almost as if to reassure her, Ash pulled off a bright smile, eyes on the field.

"Pikachu, sweep the ground with Iron Tail! Toss it up!" he said, sweeping his own hand in the air.

Ash's partner was quick to act, stabbing the concrete and slapping skyward at it, right over the several harmless feather arrows Decidueye fired previously, the arrows catapulted and impacting right onto Decidueye's spinning form. It was hardly enough to damage him, but the arrows slapping over his face were enough to distract him, the spinning stopping for the briefest of seconds before an unintentional squall of sharp leaves fell over the battlefield. Just as Decidueye ruinously fell over the ground and off balance.

Pikachu gritted his teeth as the razor-sharp greenery scratched him over, but that was but a minor inconvenience for him and Ash. The leaves rained all over the place, cutting at Decidueye's prone form as well, at the concrete surrounding them, and then-

Snap! The brief sound reached everyone, and Ash grinned with pleasure. The original Spirit Shackle stabbing Pikachu's shadow now laid broken in half by the Razor Leaf rain, its energies dissipating as Pikachu could finally step forward.

"Yes!" Ash cheered, just as Pikachu grabbed the still empowered feather, quickly charging an Iron Tail to fire it towards the rising Decidueye. Farran's partner widened his eyes, unable to dodge as the broken arrow stabbed him in the cloak.

"Korroooooo!" Decidueye squealed in pain, falling back on his knees.

Farran's confidence shattered in a second. "Decidueye!"

"Ghost-type move, right? Then that's gotta hurt!" Ash adjusted the rim of his hat, his attention quickly going back to his friend. "Pikachu, you doing good?"

"Pika!" The Pokémon nodded, jumping on all fours and inching ahead.

"Then go! Electro Ball while it's vulnerable!"

"Pika Pika Pika Chu-pi!"

Pikachu held his tail high as the ball of concentrated lightning formed at the tip, flinging it towards the defenseless and still kneeling Decidueye. Serena turned towards him, only to spot Farran to the side, his confidence seemingly returned as he grinned once again.

"Swift dodge, Acrobatics!" Farran yelled with another finger snap.

Decidueye sported a grin of his own as his body sparked blue, soaring skyward above the Electro Ball and then diving for Pikachu. The Electric-type was too surprised to react, Decidueye trapping him in his strong talons right on the hard concrete.

Ash could only stare as Decidueye flew up again, Pikachu still grasped in his talons, and seemingly still fit. "What? But-"

"Types mean nothing in Ferrum battles! The barrier nullifies any type compatibilities!" Farran almost laughed as he explained it, before punching forward. "It's all about raw strength! Like this! Toss it down, then Spirit Shackle!"

As the flying Pokémon reached enough altitude, Decidueye hurled Pikachu groundward, quickly twirling in the air and reading his makeshift bow for a new ghostly arrow. Pikachu squealed in pain as his back cracked onto the concrete, only barely getting back up as the new Spirit Shackle flew towards him, too fast to dodge.

Ash clenched his fists, probably considering everything that had happened. And it didn't take long for him to recover his cocky grin as well, staring at the incoming arrow.

"Types mean nothing? Good, then!" Ash swepted his hand.
"Pikachu, Quick Attack!"

Without even pulling himself up, Pikachu blurred into the high speed attack, the ghostly arrow piercing the concrete where Pikachu stood just as the Electric-type put as much distance from there as possible. Serena was relieved as she saw Pikachu's thinned shadow far away from the ghostly trap.

"Iron Tail! Fly into him!"

Pikachu braked suddenly, the kinetic energy still stored in his body as his shimmering white tail charged like a spring and propelled him skyward. Ash's partner blurred into speed with another Quick Attack, aiming straight for the still airborne Decidueye.

Farran grimaced, yet his confidence didn't leave him. "Defend yourself, Decidueye!"

Decidueye raised his wing as a makeshift shield, just in time for Pikachu to ram onto him at full speed and power. The impact was strong, resounding through the whole square, sending both Pikachu and Decidueye meteorizing towards the ground, sliding over the hard concrete.

Neither trainer wasted a second in ordering a new course of action.

"Avoid Pikachu and fire Razor Leaf at a distance!"

"Keep the pressure, Pikachu! Iron Tail!"

Decidueye flipped back up and twirled around, the maelstrom of sharp leaves heading once again towards Pikachu. For his part, Ash's friend started leaping around, swatting several thickets of leaves back to Decidueye, Farran's partner nimbly dodging them as he readied another salvo. Both Pokémon held their positions, only indirectly trying to engage the other as the timer passed the halfway mark and kept counting down inexorably to the match's end. Both trainers were aware of it, but neither seemed ready to concede victory.

All the while, Serena and the others could only look as the two trainers continued their war of attrition, neither allowing ground for a reversal to the other.

"Wow, is this the kind of battles Ash gets involved with?" Miette wondered, rubbing her chin with interest. Serena gave a quick,

wordless nod.

"Ash and Pikachu's skills are still as good as ever, but this Farran is hardly someone to sneeze at." Clemont furrowed his brow, taking in as much as he could of Ash's opponent and his Pokémon.

Sawyer frowned as well, holding his notebook tight in his hands. "He's like me. He studied Ash well and knew exactly what to expect."

"Keep going, Ash! You can win this!" Bonnie cheered, waving a raised fist with enthusiasm and jumping on her feet.

"Dene dene!" Dedenne squeaked, rushing ontop of Bonnie's head and emulating her, both cheering as loud as possible.

Everyone else choose to remain silent, observing the battle's progression with bated breath. Serena was just the same, not sure what to think as she hoped for the best, counting down the forty seconds left to the match. And as she did, she reflected over what she knew.

Farran was clearly biding for time, trying to keep Ash from making a move yet not making any himself beyond keeping Pikachu on the defensive. It felt jarring, almost like he was waiting for something. Was he trying to stall for a victory by time out? It was possible, but Farran also didn't seem like the type to do it. What was his current plan?

Serena shook her head again. Whatever plan Farran had in mind, Ash would find a way to counter it. That was just how he was.

And just then, almost as if to confirm her thoughts, Pikachu managed to slam an Electro Ball right through the Razor Leaf storm, slamming Decidueye down with a pained cry. Yet, Farran seemed only mildly concerned.

The advantage now regained, Ash grinned, stretching his fingers as Pikachu sparked with electricity, ready to strike again. "Sorry Farran,

but this is going to be over soon!"

"Yeah, you're right..." Farran gave a look at the battlefield, and then a smirk parted his lips. "But not how you expect."

Before Ash could ask what he meant, the entire battlefield pulsed a bright orange, stopping both Pikachu and Decidueye on their tracks. Serena and the others were just as confused as their friend was, observing the strange phenomenon. Was this something Decidueye set up? What was Farran's plan?

Their inquiries ended shortly after, when the pulsations surged above the ground in a globular fashion, taking the shape of an irregular orange crystal right after and floating mere inches away from the concrete. Ash and his friends had no idea what it was, their attention quickly going to it.

Pikachu crooked an eyebrow, tentatively inching in the crystal's direction. "Pika?"

"What's going on?" Ash was clearly trying to keep a cool head, even as his curiosity got the better of him.

For his part, Farran beamed excitedly, jumping on his feet. "Finally! Decidueye, grab it!"

"Desai!" The bird Pokémon nodded and flew forward, zeroing towards the strange crystal, spreading his wings ahead.

Ash and Pikachu's expressions shifted, the former pointing ahead to the pulsating rock. "Don't let them, Pikachu! Grab it yourself! Quick Attack!"

"Pika!" Pikachu blurred ahead, the white aura surrounding him only speeding him further as he caught up to Decidueye, both Pokémon sprinting forward to claim the crystal as theirs.

Farran grimaced, jabbing ahead. "Spirit Shackle!"

With a fluid motion, Decidueye twirled around and formed his makeshift bow and arrow, one ghostly feather slicing the wind and nailing down Pikachu's shadow. The electric mouse was yanked to the road, ruinously falling down and stopping on his tracks. Decidueye slid over the rest of the path, heading right on a collision path with the orange crystal.

No one had time to react as Decidueye smashed right into the crystal structure, shattering it in several pieces that flew in every direction. And then the shards headed back down, absorbed into Decidueye's body, a bright rainbow aura enveloping his body for a second.

The bird Pokémon gave everyone a rather toothy grin, striking a victory pose with both wings spread out, looking down on his defenseless opponent.

"Great job, Decidueye! Let's get ready!" Farran smirked in triumph, a hand over his earpiece as he pressed a button on it. "Synergy Burst!"

Decidueye flipped back down, the same aura as before blasting around him, a powerful energy enveloping the Pokémon's body in full as he spread his wings once more, the energy strong enough to blow the air around him, strength radiating from his form.

Ash and everyone else didn't know what to say. "What the-"

"Go all out! Show them what the Ferrum region has to offer!"

Decidueye let out a war cry and soared towards Pikachu, beating his wings together to blast a storm of leaves in the Electric-type's direction. Pikachu cried in surprise as the tornado moved upwards, trapping him inside the whirlwind of leaves, ripping him away from the Spirit Shackle's grasp.

"Pikachu!" Ash yelled, eyes wide in shock.

His concern was lost to the expanding whirlwind of sharp leaves, now a large cyclone on the center of the arena. The bird Pokémon flew around his typhoon, circling around the area in search of a vantage point, just a bit underneath Pikachu's level. With a swift motion of his wings, several Spirit Shackle feathers formed around his sides, all flying forward into the tornado and piercing into Pikachu. Ash's Pokémon squeaked, yet he couldn't break free as the tornado only whirled more powerful.

No one could believe their eyes. Not Serena, and most definitely not Ash, still at a loss for words. And through it all, Farran smiled in triumph.

"Now, for the grand finale! Shining Feather!" Farran yelled, snapping his fingers once again.

Decidueye drew his bowstring, a ghostly feather forming in it again, imbued with even more energy and glowing in a golden hue. He aimed, charged, and *fired* .

The golden arrow sliced through the leafy storm, nailing straight into Pikachu's damaged form. The impact shimmered brightly, the entire tornado exploding in a powerful blast.

Decidueye turned around, holding his feathery coat like a cape, almost teleporting behind the blast as Pikachu meteorized on the ground, his whole body littered with bruises. Ash's partner tried to stand up, only to fall back weakly on the ground, unable to do anything.

After several silent seconds, Nia rose her arm in Farran's direction. "Pikachu is unable to battle! The winner of the first round is Farran!"

"Yes!" The Ferric boy rushed in the middle of the battlefield with glee, offering a high five to his partner. "Great job, Decidueye!"

Decidueye shared the high five and even a fist bump with his trainer, quickly following it up with a smile to the crowd and twin victory

signs. However, none of the crowd was paying much attention to him, instead focusing on Ash, still looking over his defeated partner. Several thoughts seemed to swirl on his head, and Serena was almost worried of how he was going to take it.

Fortunately, her worries turned out to be unfounded when Ash adjusted his hat and finally pulled off one of his usual smiles, looking over at his friend with pride. Pikachu appreciated it, even if he seemed more than a bit upset, staring at the ground as he slowly got back on all fours.

Ash shook his head. "Don't feel too bad. You did great, Pikachu."

"Pika..." Pikachu didn't seem too convinced, but he still smiled back to his trainer, finally back to a stand.

Ash walked closer to grab his friend, only for the battlefield to start glowing, engulfing the area with a pleasant white light. Ash stood back with surprise, looking over the arena as both Pikachu and Decidueye's bodies started to glow as well. Ash's Electric-type partner shared a similar confusion, looking over himself as all his scratches and wounds were patched out under his eyes, while Farran and his partner appeared completely nonplussed about it.

The light was gone as quickly as it came, with both Decidueye and Pikachu looking as healthy as they were at the beginning of the round.

"What just happened?" Serena asked, looking over to Nia.

The woman smiled, pushing her glasses up. "It's just part of the Ferrum battle arenas' setup. As we fight in a best two out of three format, both challengers are completely healed between rounds to ensure a fair battle."

"An instant healing service on par with a Pokémon Center's equipment? Impressive..." Clemont rubbed his chin, ideas probably already whirring in his mind.

"Yeah! Science really is amazing!" Ash agreed, twinkle-eyed as ever. His attention then shifted back on his newfound rival, stretching his fingers in anticipation. "Well, Farran, are you ready for round two?"

Farran smiled, only for his expression to change abruptly, concern drawn over his face. He shared a quick look to Decidueye and then to a nearby clock, and he seemed almost exaggeratedly worried as he turned back to Ash.

"Well... I'd love to say yes, but..." He grimaced, avoiding to look in his opponent's eyes. "I've got an important appointment in a few minutes and really gotta dash. I just wanted to battle you and indulge Decidueye here."

The boy didn't even wait for anyone's reply before jetting away from everyone, Decidueye not far behind as they both waved at their backs. "Thanks for the battle though, it was great! I look forward to have another match with you!"

And as soon as he arrived the boy was gone, disappearing behind one of the several secondary routes of Neos City. It took quite a bit for anyone to say anything, trying to rationalize just what happened with that very mercurial kid.

In the end it was Bonnie that broke the ice, with a sigh and a shrug. "What a weird guy..."

"Well... at least this won't count on anyone's record, since the battle wasn't finished." Nia scratched her head, while her Weavile nodded sagely as he now sipped from a drink.

Ash approached her while he allowed Pikachu to climb back up on his shoulder. "What was all that strange energy around the battlefield and that 'Burst Attack', Nia?"

"Those are both part of the core tenets of Ferrum battles, Synergy Power. It's a kind of power that gathers in specific spots around the region, where each battle arena is built." The Ferric woman pointed

to the battlefield. "When harnessed through Synergy Stones, they allow Pokémon to reach levels of power they could never attain alone. In some cases, it can even trigger Mega Evolution without the need for the required stones."

"That's possible?" Alain blinked, his attention shifting to the new Mega Ring on his wrist.

"Yeah. That's part of the reason we came here, after all." Sycamore joined in, glancing over the arena as well. "I want to know all I can about this strange phenomenon. I'm sure it will allow us to better understand what Mega Evolution is and how to harness it for peaceful purposes."

"I'm not a brainiac or anything, I'm only aware of the battle-related applications of Synergy Power." Nia chuckled out, and then started tapping at the little device over her ear. "Every battle trainer owns a Synergy Stone stored in their Battle AR, allowing them to harness their power to trigger a state known as Synergy Burst, powering up the Pokémon for a brief period of time. During that timespan, it's possible to concentrate all the energies in a powerful move called Burst Attack, which depends from Pokémon to Pokémon. That's what Decidueye's 'Shining Feather' was."

"What is Synergy Power, though?" Sawyer inquired as he jotted down some notes.

Nia scratched her cheek, thinking about it. "I don't know the full details, but to put it simply... it's the very energy of the Earth itself, or at least a part of it we can tap into through the bond between humans and Pokémon."

"The energy of the Earth itself..." Bonnie trailed off, looking back to the empty pocket in her little bag.

Serena got closer, already knowing what her young friend was feeling. "You're thinking about Squishy, right?"

Bonnie nodded without a further word, just as Dedenne climbed over her shoulder to try and cheer her up. For all of Bonnie's maturity in handling farewells, it was clear she still very much missed her little friend.

The exchange was enough to catch Nia's attention, the woman tilting her head quizzically. "What's a Squishy?"

"A friend. He's busy with other things right now." Bonnie pulled off a radiant grin again, as if all sadness left her body. "But it's okay, we'll meet again one day."

Nia furrowed her brow. "For some reason, I think there's an interesting story here..."

"There is, but it's a long one." Ash giggled a bit, looking wistfully at the clouds ahead. "One of my Pokémon is with him, too. A very unique Greninja."

"It's called Ash-Greninja!" Bonnie jumped on her feet, seizing the chance to explain it. "Ash and Greninja acted as one and become so powerful! Greninja looked like Ash, too!"

Nia seemed to only barely follow along the girl's tale, even as Sawyer and Alain seemed to silently agree to it. Sycamore thus stepped in. "He possessed a special power known as Bond Phenomenon. It powered up his capabilities considerably, and relied on a synchronization between him and Ash."

"Well, ain't it similar to Synergy Burst..." Nia tapped her chin with interest, eyes falling back on Ash for a second. "Who knows, maybe you stumbled into an offshot of that."

"That's a hypothesis worth considering." Sycamore smiled, barely keeping his excitement at bay as he looked skyward with confidence. "Lots of marvelous questions to answer. That's what a researcher lives for!"

With the topic now breached, it was Sawyer's and Alain's turns to share their own information about Ash's Kalosian partner, relating of their times facing Greninja and Ash in battle. They seemed happy reminiscing of their past clashes, even if Miette seemed more than a bit annoyed to be the odd one out with nothing to add to the conversation. Serena's attention quickly shifted to her side however, noticing Ash contemplating the battlefield. He held Pikachu tight, and didn't seem too interested in discussing Greninja.

Worry settled in again, and Serena turned back to both Clemont and Bonnie. The siblings seemed to also have noticed Ash's behavior, as they nodded back to her and got closer to Ash. Serena even glanced over to Miette, only for her to shook her head and push Serena forward. She was a bit surprised, but assumed she understood this was a moment for Ash and his Kalos companions. Emboldened, Serena got closer as well, pacing ahead of her two closest friends to place a hand over Ash's shoulder.

"Ash, are you alright?" she asked, serious.

Ash got briefly startled, looking almost apologetic as he turned back to Serena and his friends. He nodded, gaze trailing off towards the arena once more.

"Yeah, I was just thinking about the battle." He clenched his fists, turning more serious. "Farran and his Decidueye were real strong. Me and Pikachu could barely keep up."

Serena stood there, not sure what to think, already wondering how to help him. Then Ash pulled off his usual confident smile, and her worries melted away.

"Next time, let's show them what we're made of! We'll learn everything we can about Ferrum battles, and reach the top of the Iron League Tournament!" He held a punch to the sky, his face brimming with unmatched confidence.

"Pi-Pikachu!" Pikachu squeaked, emulating his trainer with just as much energy.

As Ash and his first partner traded excited looks, his friends couldn't help but laugh. It was such a typical scene for them by now, yet it was always something nice to see.

Bonnie gave a good natured sigh and a shrug, clearly happy.
"Typical Ash..."

"Always looking for the next challenge." Pushing his glasses up, Clemont looked over his best friend wistfully. "Never change."

"I won't!" Ash gave all of his friends a confident grin, placing a fist over his chest. "I'm going to be a Pokémon Master, after all! Be ready, Ferrum region, because I don't plan to lose!"

The boy's boast quickly turned infectious, his friends smiling back at him. The performer mentally chastized herself; sure, Ash had lost himself once, but she should've known that Ash had grown from that, remembering that each loss and setback was just a further opportunity to grow. That was the quality she admired the most of him, after all.

She didn't appear to be the only person impressed by it as Nia was approached them, her discussion with Sycamore seemingly over, with her Weavile giving a thumbs up as he opened up another soda to chug down.

"Well said!" She smirked, turning her head to the nearby Pokémon Center. "If you're so fired up, I think it's time to sign up for the tournament. I doubt you want your opponents to keep waiting."

"Sure!" A fist to the sky once more, Ash faced all of his gathered friends, gesturing to come along. "Let's go, everybody!"

And coming along they did, all moving at once towards the Pokémon Center. They were all ready for their new adventure in the Ferrum

region.

A shorter chapter than the previous one, mostly owing to how this was initially the latter part of the third one before I was suggested to split it in two, which I feel was the best decision. While I know the story so far has been a bit on the slow side, I hope this battle showed well what kind of battling to expect in the Ferrum region. I had a lot of fun with Farran's battle style and his Decidueye, and I look forward to further develop them in the future. While Ash lost here, I wanted to make sure to clarify that he's hardly reset and more surprised by unforeseen new challenges, but he's otherwise still a very competent battler. Hopefully it reflected well in the story.

And in regards to Greninja and Squishy... I'll just say that I don't add nods like these without a purpose. What the purpose is, however, will have to wait its due time.

With this chapter, I officially reached the end of the 'pilot' phase of this story, with the plot proper starting in earnest from the next chapter. I'm currently working on chapter 5 as I write this, but I plan to continue to publish this story in 'batches' of chapters: I'll write until an adequate stopping point, start publishing the chapters on a semi-regular schedule, and keep working on chapters along the way, as a way to both ensure the story always stops at good point for a pause while allowing me time to ensure the chapters flow well from the other. I'll make sure to stick to a consistent rhythm, but I can confirm that, no matter what, this is a story that I want to see to its end. You will not be left hanging, nor will it be cancelled.

I thank Marcellasnow231, Epicocity, Ander Arias, AmourshippingCanon and Z for their kind reviews. I hope this first taste of Ferrum battles met your expectations, and to keep doing well with this story! Until the next chapter, thanks to everyone that will read!